

EPIC HEROIC FANTASY IN THE  
GREAT TRADITION

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the first publication of his classic fantasy novel *Magician*, Raymond E. Feist has prepared a new, revised edition, to incorporate over 15,000 words of text omitted from previous editions so that, in his own words, 'it is essentially the book I would have written had I the skills I possess today'.

At Crydee, a frontier outpost in the tranquil Kingdom of the Isles, an orphan boy, Pug, is apprenticed to a master magician - and the destinies of two worlds are changed forever. Suddenly the peace of the Kingdom is destroyed as mysterious alien invaders swarm through the land. Pug is swept up into the conflict but for him and his warrior friend, Tomas, an odyssey into the unknown has only just begun. Tomas will inherit a legacy of savage power from an ancient civilisation. Pug's destiny is to lead him through a rift in the fabric of space and time to the mastery of the unimaginable powers of a strange new magic...

**'Epic scope...fast-moving action...vivid imagination.'**  
WASHINGTON POST

**'Tons of intrigue and action'**  
PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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RAYMOND  
E. FEIST  
MAGICIAN

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'TOTALLY GRIPPING' WASHINGTON POST

MAGICIAN

SCIENCE  
FICTION  
FANTASY

NEW REVISED  
EDITION

## FOREWORD

It is with some hesitation and a great deal of trepidation that an author approaches the task of revising an earlier edition of fiction. This is especially true if the book was his first effort, judged successful by most standards, and continuously in print for a decade.

Magician was all this, and more. In late 1977 I decided to try my hand at writing, part-time, while I was an employee of the University of California, San Diego. It is now some fifteen years later, and I have been a full-time writer for the last fourteen years, successful in this craft beyond my wildest dreams. Magician, the first novel in what became known as The Riftwar Saga, was a book that quickly took on a life of its own. I hesitate to admit this publicly, but the truth is that part of the success of the book was my ignorance of what makes a commercially successful novel. My willingness to plunge blindly forward into a tale spanning two dissimilar worlds, covering twelve years in the lives of several major and dozens of minor characters, breaking numerous rules of plotting along the way, seemed to find kindred souls among readers the world over. After a decade in print, my best judgment is that the appeal of the book is based upon its being what was known once as a "ripping yarn." I had little ambition beyond spinning a good story, one that satisfied my sense of wonder, adventure, and whimsy. It turned out that several million readers—many of whom read translations in languages I can't even begin to comprehend—found it one that satisfied their tastes for such a yarn as well.

But insofar as it was a first effort, some pressures of the marketplace did manifest themselves during the creation of the final book. Magician is by anyone's measure a large book. When the penultimate manuscript version sat upon my editor's desk, I was informed that some fifty thousand words would have to be cut. And cut I did. Mostly line by line, but a few scenes were either truncated or excised.

While I could live out my life with the original manuscript as published being the only edition ever read, I have always felt that some of the material cut added a certain resonance, a counterpoint if you will, to key elements of the tale. The relationships between characters, the additional details of an alien world, the minor moments of reflection and mirth that act to balance the more frenetic activity of conflict and adventure, all these things were "close but not quite what I had in mind."

In any event, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the original publication of Magician, I have been permitted to return to this work, to reconstruct and change, to add and cut as I see fit, to bring forth what is known in publishing as the "Author's Preferred Edition" of the work.

So, with the old admonition, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," ringing in my ears, I return to the first work I undertook, back when I had no pretensions of craft, no stature as a bestselling author, and basically no idea of what I was doing. My desire is to restore some of those excised bits, some of the minor detail that I felt added to the heft of the narrative, as well as the weight of the book. Other material was more directly related to the books that follow, setting some of the background for the mythic underpinning of the Riftwar. The slightly lengthy discussion

of lore between Tully and Kulgan in Chapter Three, as well as some of the things revealed to Pug on the Tower of Testing were clearly in this area. My editor wasn't sold on the idea of a sequel, then, so some of this was cut. Returning it may be self-indulgent, but as this was material I felt belonged in the original book, it has been restored.

To those readers who have already discovered Magician, who wonder if it's in their interests to purchase this edition, I would like to reassure them that nothing profound has been changed. No characters previously dead are now alive, no battles lost are now won, and two boys still find the same destiny. I ask you to feel no compulsion to read this new volume, for your memory of the original work is as valid, perhaps more so, than mine. But if you wish to return to the world of Pug and Tomas, to rediscover old friends and forgotten adventure, then consider this edition your opportunity to see a bit more than the last time. And to the new reader, welcome. I trust you'll find this work to your satisfaction. It is with profound gratitude I wish to thank you all, new readers and old acquaintances, for without your support and encouragement, ten years of "ripping yarns" could not have been possible. If I have the opportunity to provide you with a small part of the pleasure I feel in being able to share my fanciful adventures with you, we are equally rewarded, for by your embracing my works you have allowed me to fashion more. Without you there would have been no Silverthorn, A Darkness at Sethanon, Faerie Tale, and no Empire Trilogy. The letters get read, if not answered-even if they sometimes take months to reach me and the kind remarks, in passing at public appearances, have enriched me beyond measure. But most of all, you gave me the freedom to 'practice a craft that was begun to "see if I could do it," while working at the Residence halls of John Muir College at UCSD. So, thank you. I guess I did it." And with this work, I hope you'll agree that this time I did it a little more elegantly, with a little more color, weight, and resonance.

RAYMOND E. FEIST  
San Diego, California  
August 1991

## MAGICIAN

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### Storm

THE STORM HAD BROKEN. Pug danced along the edge of the rocks, his feet finding scant purchase as he made his way among the tide pools. His dark eyes darted about as he peered into each pool under the cliff face, seeking the spiny creatures driven into the shallows by the recently passed storm. His boyish muscles bunched under his light shirt as he shifted the sack of sandcrawlers, rockclaws, and crabs plucked from this water garden. The afternoon sun sent sparkles through the sea spray swirling around him, as the west wind blew his sun-streaked brown hair about. Pug set his sack down, checked to make sure it was securely tied, then squatted on a clear patch of sand. The sack was not quite full, but Pug relished the extra hour or so that he could relax. Megar the cook wouldn't trouble him about the time as long as the sack was almost full. Resting with his back against a large rock, Pug was soon dozing in the sun's warmth. A cool wet spray woke him hours later. He opened his eyes with a start, knowing he had stayed much too long. Westward, over the sea, dark thunderheads were forming above the black outline of the Six Sisters, the small islands on the horizon. The roiling, surging clouds, with rain trailing below like some sooty veil, heralded another of the sudden storms common to this part of the coast in early summer.

To the south, the high bluffs of Sailor's Grief reared up against the sky, as waves crashed against the base of that rocky pinnacle. Whitecaps started to form behind the breakers, a sure sign the storm would quickly strike. Pug knew he was in danger, for the storms of summer could drown anyone on the beaches, or if severe enough, on the low ground beyond. He picked up his sack and started north, toward the castle. As he moved among the pools, he felt the coolness in the wind turn to a deeper, wetter cold. The day began to be broken by a patchwork of shadows as the first clouds passed before the sun, bright colors fading to shades of grey. Out to sea, lightning flashed against the blackness of the clouds, and the distant boom of thunder rode over the noise of the waves. Pug picked up speed when he came to the first stretch of open beach.

The storm was coming in faster than he would have thought possible, driving the rising tide before it. By the time he reached the second stretch of tide pools, there was barely ten feet of dry sand between water's edge and cliffs. Pug hurried as fast as was safe across the rocks, twice nearly catching his foot. As he reached the next expanse of sand, he mistimed his jump from the last rock and landed poorly. He fell to the sand, grasping his ankle. As if waiting for the mishap, the tide surged forward, covering him for a moment. He reached out blindly and felt his sack carried away. Frantically grabbing at it, Pug lunged forward, only to have his ankle fail. He went under, gulping water. He raised his head, sputtering and coughing. He started to stand when a second wave, higher

than the last, hit him in the chest, knocking him backward. Pug had grown up playing in the waves and was an experienced swimmer, but the pain of his ankle and the battering of the waves were bringing him to the edge of panic. He fought it off and came up for air as the wave receded. He half swam, half scrambled toward the cliff face, knowing the water would be only inches deep there. Pug reached the cliffs and leaned against them, keeping as much weight off the injured ankle as possible. He inched along the rock wall, while each wave brought the water higher. When Pug finally reached a place where he could make his way upward, water was swirling at his waist. He had to use all his strength to pull himself up to the path. He lay panting a moment, then started to crawl up the pathway, unwilling to trust his balky ankle on this rocky footing. The first drops of rain began to fall as he scrambled along, bruising knees and shins on the rocks, until he reached the grassy top of the bluffs. Pug fell forward exhausted, panting from the exertion of the climb. The scattered drops grew into a light but steady rain.

When he had caught his breath, Pug sat up and examined the swollen ankle. It was tender to the touch, but he was reassured when he could move it: it was not broken. He would have to limp the entire way back, but with the threat of drowning on the beach behind him, he felt relatively buoyant. Pug would be a drenched, chilled wretch when he reached the town. He would have to find a lodging there, for the gates of the castle would be closed for the night, and with his tender ankle he would not attempt to climb the wall behind the stables. Besides, should he wait and slip into the keep the next day, only Megar would have words for him, but if he was caught coming over the wall, Swordmaster Fannon or Horsemaster Algon would surely have a lot worse in store for him than words. While he rested, the rain took on an insistent quality and the sky darkened as the late-afternoon sun was completely engulfed in storm clouds. His momentary relief was replaced with anger at himself for losing the sack of sandcrawlers. His displeasure doubled when he considered his folly at falling asleep. Had he remained awake, he would have made the return trip unhurriedly, would not have sprained his ankle, and would have had time to explore the streambed above the bluffs for the smooth stones he prized so dearly for slinging. Now there would be no stones, and it would be at least another week before he could return. If Megar didn't send another boy instead, which was likely now that he was returning empty-handed. Pug's attention shifted to the discomfort of sitting in the rain, and he decided it was time to move on. He stood and tested his ankle. It protested such treatment, but he could get along on it. He limped over the grass to where he had left his belongings and picked up his rucksack, staff, and sling. He swore an oath he had heard soldiers at the keep use when he found the rucksack ripped apart and his bread and cheese missing. Raccoons, or possibly sand lizards, he thought. He tossed the now useless sack aside and wondered at his misfortune. Taking a deep breath, he leaned on his staff as he started across the low rolling hills that divided the bluffs from the road. Stands of small trees were scattered over the landscape, and Pug regretted there wasn't more substantial shelter nearby, for there was none upon the bluffs. He would be no wetter for trudging to town than for staying under a tree. The wind picked up, and Pug felt the first cold bite against his wet back.

He shivered and hurried his pace as well as he could. The small trees started to bend before the wind, and Pug felt as if a great hand were pushing at his back. Reaching the road, he turned north. He heard the eerie sound of the great forest off to the east, the wind whistling through the branches of the ancient oaks, adding to its already foreboding aspect. The dark glades of the forest were probably no more perilous than the King's road, but remembered tales of outlaws and other, less human, malefactors stirred the hairs on the boy's neck. Cutting across the King's road, Pug gained a little shelter in the gully that ran alongside it. The wind intensified and rain stung his eyes, bringing tears to already wet cheeks. A gust caught him, and he stumbled off balance for a moment. Water was gathering in the roadside gully, and he had to step carefully to keep from losing his footing in unexpectedly deep puddles. For nearly an hour he made his way through the ever growing storm. The road turned northwest, bringing him almost full face into the howling wind. Pug leaned into the wind, his shirt whipping out behind him. He swallowed hard, to force down the choking panic rising within him. He knew he was in danger now, for the storm was gaining in fury far beyond normal for this time of year. Great ragged bolts of lightning lit the dark landscape, briefly outlining the trees and road in harsh, brilliant white and opaque black. The dazzling afterimages, black and white reversed, stayed with him for a moment each time, confusing his senses. Enormous thunder peals sounding overhead felt like physical blows. Now his fear of the storm outweighed his fear of imagined brigands and goblins. He decided to walk among the trees near the road; the wind would be lessened somewhat by the boles of the oaks. As Pug closed upon the forest, a crashing sound brought him to a halt. In the gloom of the storm he could barely make out the form of a black forest boar as it burst out of the undergrowth. The pig tumbled from the brush, lost its footing, then scrambled to its feet a few yards away. Pug could see it clearly as it stood there regarding him, swinging its head from side to side. Two large tusks seemed to glow in the dim light as they dripped rainwater. Fear made its eyes wide, and it pawed at the ground. The forest pigs were bad-tempered at best, but normally avoided humans. This one was panic-stricken by the storm, and Pug knew if it charged he could be badly gored, even killed. Standing stock-still, Pug made ready to swing his staff, but hoped the pig would return to the woods. The boar's head raised, testing the boy's smell on the wind. Its pink eyes seemed to glow as it trembled with indecision. A sound made it turn toward the trees for a moment, then it dropped its head and charged. Pug swung his staff, bringing it down in a glancing blow to the side of the pig's head, turning it. The pig slid sideways in the muddy footing, hitting Pug in the legs. He went down as the pig slipped past. Lying on the ground, Pug saw the boar skitter about as it turned to charge again. The pig was upon him, and Pug had no time to stand. He thrust the staff before him in a vain attempt to turn the animal again. The boar dodged the staff and Pug tried to roll away, but a weight fell across his body. Pug covered his face with his hands, keeping his arms to his chest, expecting to be gored.

", After a moment he realized the pig was still. Uncovering his face, he discovered the pig lying across his lower legs, a black-feathered,

clothyard arrow protruding from its side. Pug looked toward the forest. A man garbed in brown leather was standing near the edge of the trees, carefully wrapping a yeoman's longbow with an oilcloth cover. Once the valuable weapon was protected from further abuse by the weather, the man crossed to stand over the boy and beast. He was cloaked and hooded, his face hidden. He knelt next to Pug and shouted over the sound of the wind, "Are you 'right, boy?" as he lifted the dead boar easily from Pug's legs. "Bones broken?"

.I don't think so," Pug yelled back, taking account of himself. His right side smarted, and his legs felt equally bruised. with his ankle still tender, he was feeling ill-used today, but nothing seemed broken or permanently damaged. Large, meaty hands lifted him to his feet. "Here," the man commanded, handing him his staff and the bow. Pug took them while the stranger quickly gutted the boar with a large hunter's knife. He completed his work and turned to Pug. "Come with me, boy. You had best lodge with my master and me. It's not far, but we'd best hurry. This storm'll get worse afore it's over. Can you walk?" Taking an unsteady step, Pug nodded. Without a word the man shouldered the pig and took his bow. "Come," he said, as he turned toward the forest. He set off at a brisk pace, which pug had to scramble to match. The forest cut the fury of the storm so little that conversation was impossible. A lightning flash lit the scene for a moment, and Pug caught a glimpse of the man's face. Pug tried to remember if he had seen the stranger before. He had the look common to the hunters and foresters that lived in the forest of Crydee: large-shouldered, tall, and solidly built. He had dark hair and beard and the raw, weather-beaten appearance of one who spends most of his time outdoors. For a few fanciful moments the boy wondered if he might be some member of an outlaw band, hiding in the heart of the forest. He gave up the notion, for no outlaw would trouble himself with an obviously penniless keep boy. Remembering the man had mentioned having a master, Pug suspected he was a franklin, one who lived on the estate of a landholder. He would be in the holder's service, but not bound to him as a bondsman. The franklins were freeborn, giving a share of crop or herd in exchange for the use of land. He must be freeborn. No bondsman would be allowed to carry a longbow, for they were much too Valuable-and dangerous. Still, Pug couldn't remember any landholdings in the forest. It was a mystery to the boy, but the toll of the day's abuses was quickly driving away any curiosity.

AFTeR WHAT SEEMED to be hours, the man walked into a thicket of trees. Pug nearly lost him in the darkness, for the sun had set some time before, taking with it what faint light the storm had allowed. He followed the man more from the sound of his footfalls and an awareness of his presence than from sight. Pug sensed he was on a path through the trees, for his footsteps met no resisting brush or detritus. From where they had been moments before, the path would be difficult to find in the daylight, impossible at night, unless it was already known. Soon they entered a clearing, in the midst of which sat a small stone cottage. Light shone through a single window, and smoke rose from the chimney. They crossed the clearing, and Pug wondered at the storm's relative mildness in this one spot in the forest. Once before the door, the man stood to one side and

said, "You go in, boy. I must dress the pig." Nodding dumbly, Pug pushed open the wooden door and stepped in. "Close that door, boy. You'll give me a chill and cause me my death." Pug jumped to obey, slamming the door harder than he intended.

He turned, taking in the scene before him. The interior of the cottage was a small single room. Against one wall was the fireplace, with a good-size hearth before it. A bright, cheery fire burned, casting a warm glow. Next to the fireplace a table sat, behind which a heavyset, yellow-robed figure rested on a bench. His grey hair and beard nearly covered his entire head, except for a pair of vivid blue eyes that twinkled in the firelight. A long pipe emerged from the beard, producing heroic clouds of pale smoke. Pug knew the man. "Master Kulgan . . . was the Duke's magician and adviser, a familiar face around the castle keep. Kulgan leveled a gaze at Pug, then said in a deep voice, given to rich rolling sounds and powerful tones,

"So you know me, then?"

"Yes, sir. From the castle."

"What is your name, boy from the keep?"

"Pug, Master Kulgan."

"Now I remember you." The magician absently waved his hand.

"Do not call me 'Master,' Pug-though I am rightly called a master of my arts," he said with a merry crinkling around his eyes. "I am higher-born than you, it is true, but not by much. Come, there is a blanket hanging by the fire, and you are drenched. Hang your clothes to dry, then sit there." He pointed to a bench opposite him.

Pug did as he was bid, keeping an eye on the magician the entire time. He was a member of the Duke's court, but still a magician, an object of suspicion, generally held in low esteem by the common folk. If a farmer had a cow calve a monster, or blight strike the crops, villagers were apt to ascribe it to the work of some magician lurking in nearby shadows. In times not too far past they would have stoned Kulgan from Crydee as likely as not. His position with the Duke earned him the tolerance of the townsfolk now, but old fears died slowly. After his garments were hung, Pug sat down. He started when he saw a pair of red eyes regarding him from just beyond the magician's table. A scaled head rose up above the tabletop and studied the boy.

Kulgan laughed at the boy's discomfort. "Come, boy. Fantus will not hurt you." He dropped his hand to the head of the creature, who sat next to him on his bench, and rubbed above its eye ridges. It closed its eyes and gave forth a soft crooning sound, not unlike the purring of a cat. Pug shut his mouth, which had popped open with surprise, then

asked, "Is he truly a dragon, sir?"

The magician laughed, a rich, good-natured sound. "Betimes he thinks he is, boy. Fantus is a fire-drake, cousin to the dragon, though of smaller stature." The creature opened one eye and fastened it on the magician. "But of equal heart," Kulgan quickly added, and the drake closed his eye again. Kulgan spoke softly, in conspiratorial tones. "He is



very clever, so mind what you say to him. He is a creature of finely fashioned sensibilities." Pug nodded that he would. "Can he breathe fire?" he asked, eyes wide with wonder. To any boy of thirteen, even a cousin to a dragon was worthy of awe. "When the mood suits him, he can belch out a flame or two, though he seems rarely in the mood. I think it is due to the rich diet I supply him with, boy. He has not had to hunt for years, so he is something out of practice in the ways of drakes. In truth, I spoil him shamelessly."

Pug found the notion somehow reassuring. If the magician cared enough to spoil this creature, no matter how outlandish, then he seemed somehow more human, less mysterious. Pug studied Fantus, admiring how the fire brought golden highlights to his emerald scales. About the size of a small hound, the drake possessed a long, sinuous .

neck atop which rested an alligatorlike head. His wings were folded across his back, and two clawed feet extended before him, aimlessly pawing the air, while Kulgan scratched behind bony eye ridges. His long tail swung back and forth, inches above the floor.

The door opened and the big bowman entered, holding a dressed and spitted loin of pork before him. Without a word he crossed to the fireplace and set the meat to cook. Fantus raised his head, using his long neck to good advantage to peek over the table. With a flick of his forked tongue, the drake jumped down and, in stately fashion, ambled over to the hearth. He selected a warm spot before the fire and curled up to doze away the wait before dinner. The franklin unfastened his cloak and hung it on a peg by the door. "Storm will pass afore dawn, I'm thinking." He returned to the fire and prepared a basting of wine and herbs for the pig. Pug was startled to see a large scar that ran down the left side of the man's face, showing red and angry in the firelight. Kulgan waved his pipe in the franklin's direction. "Knowing my tight-lipped man here, you'll not have made his proper acquaintance.

Meecham, this boy is Pug, from the keep at Castle Crydee." Meecham gave a brief nod, then returned to tending the roasting loin.

Pug nodded back, though a bit late for Meecham to notice. "I never thought to thank you for saving me from the boar."

Meecham replied, "There's no need for thanks, boy. Had I not startled the beast, it's unlikely it would have charged you." He left the hearth and crossed over to another part of the room, took some brown dough from a cloth-covered bucket, and started kneading. "Well, sir," said Pug to Kulgan, "it was his arrow that killed the pig. It was indeed fortunate that he was following the animal." Kulgan laughed. "The poor creature, who is our most welcome guest for dinner, happened to be as much a victim of circumstance as yourself." Pug looked perplexed. "I don't follow, sir." Kulgan stood and took down an object from the topmost shelf on his bookcase and placed it on the table before the boy. It was wrapped in a cover of dark blue velvet, so Pug knew at once it must be a prize of great value for such an expensive material to be used for covering. Kulgan removed the velvet, revealing an orb of crystal that gleamed in the firelight. Pug gave an ah of pleasure at the beauty of it, for it was without apparent flaw and splendid in its simplicity of form.

Kulgan pointed to the sphere of glass. "This device was fashioned as a gift by Althafain of Carse, a most puissant artihcer of magic, who thought me worthy of such a present, as I have done him a favor or two in the past-but that is of little matter. Having just this day returned " from the company of Master Althafain, I was testing his token. Look deep into the orb, Pug." Pug fixed his eyes on the ball and tried to follow the flicker of firelight "that seemed to play deep within its structure. The reflections of the room, multiplied a hundredfold, merged and danced as his eyes tried to ;' fasten upon each aspect within the orb. They flowed and blended, then grew cloudy and obscure. A soft white glow at the center of the ball :replaced the red of firelight, and Pug felt his gaze become trapped by its pleasing warmth. Like the warmth of the kitchen at the keep, he thought absently. Suddenly the milky white within the ball vanished, and Pug could see an image of the kitchen before his eyes. Fat Alfan the cook was making pastries, licking the sweet crumbs from his fingers. This brought the wrath of Megar, the head cook, down upon his head, for Megar considered it a disgusting habit.

Pug laughed at the scene, one he had witnessed before many times, and it vanished. Suddenly he felt tired. KUlgan wrapped the orb in the cloth and put it away. "You did well, boy," he said thoughtfully. He stood watching the boy for a moment, as if considering something, then sat down. "I would not have suspected you of being able to fashion such a clear image in one try, but you seem to be more than you first appear to be."

"Sir?"

"Never mind, Pug." He paused for a moment, then said, "I was using that toy for the first time, judging how far I could send my sight, when I spied you making for the road. From your limp and bruised condition, I judged that you would never reach the town, so I sent Meecham to fetch you." Pug looked embarrassed by the unusual attention, color rising to his cheeks. He said, with a thirteen-year-old's high estimation of his own ability, "You needn't have done that, sir. I would have reached the town in due time."

Kulgan smiled. "Perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. The storm is unseasonably severe and perilous for traveling." Pug listened to the soft tattoo of rain on the roof of the cottage. The storm seemed to have slackened, and Pug doubted the magician's

words. As if reading the boy's thought, Kulgan said, "Doubt me not, Pug. This glade is protected by more than the great boles. Should you pass beyond the circle of oaks that marks the edge of my holding, you would feel the storm's fury. Meecham, how do you gauge this wind?" Meecham put down the bread dough he was kneading and thought for a moment. "Near as bad as the storm that beached six ships three years back." He paused for a moment, as if reconsidering the estimate, then nodded his endorsement. "Yes, nearly as bad, though it won't blow so long."

Pug thought back three years to the storm that had blown a Quegan trading fleet bound for Crydee onto the rocks of Sailor's Grief. At its height, the guards on the castle walls were forced to stay in the towers, lest they be blown down. If this storm was that severe, then Kulgan's magic was

impressive, for outside the cottage it sounded no worse than a spring rain. Kulgan sat back on the bench, occupied with trying to light his extinguished pipe. As he produced a large cloud of sweet white smoke, Pug's attention wandered to a case of books standing behind the magician. His lips moved silently as he tried to discern what was written on the bindings, but could not. Kulgan lifted an eyebrow and said, "So you can read, aye?" Pug started, alarmed that he might have offended the magician by intruding on his domain. Kulgan, sensing his embarrassment, said, "It is all right, boy. It is no crime to know letters." Pug felt his discomfort diminish. "I can read a little, sir. Megar the cook has shown me how to read the tallies on the stores laid away for the kitchen in the cellars. I know some numbers, as well."

"Numbers, too," the magician exclaimed good-naturedly.

"Well, you are something of a rare bird." He reached behind himself and pulled out one volume, bound in red-brown leather, from the shelf. He opened it, squinting at one page, then another, and at last found a page that seemed to meet his requirements. He turned the open book around and lay it upon the table before Pug. Kulgan pointed to a page illuminated by a magnificent design of snakes, flowers, and twining vines in a colorful design around a large letter in the upper left corner. "Read this, boy." Pug had never seen anything remotely like it. His lessons had been on plain parchment with letters fashioned in Megar's blunt script, using a charcoal stick. He sat, fascinated by the details of the work, then realized the magician was staring at him. Regaining his wits, he began to read. "And then there came a sum . . . summons from . . ." He looked

at the word, stumbling over the complex combinations that were new to

him. ". . . Zacara." He paused, looking at Kulgan to see if he was correct. The magician nodded for him to continue. "For the north was to be forgot . . . forgotten, lest the heart of the empire languish and all be lost. And though of Bosnia from birth, those soldiers still were loyal to Great Kesh in their service. So for her great need, they took up their arms and put on their armor and quit Bosnia, taking ship to the south, to save all from destruction."

Kulgan said, "That's enough" and gently closed the cover of the book. "You are well gifted with letters for a keep boy." "This book, sir, what is it?" asked Pug, as Kulgan took it from him. "I have never seen anything like it." Kulgan looked at Pug for a moment, with a gaze that made him uncomfortable again, then smiled, breaking the tension. As he put the book back, he said, "It is a history of this land, boy. It was given as a gift by the abbot of an Ishapian monastery. It is a translation of a Keshian text, over a hundred years old." Pug nodded and said, "It all sounded very strange. what does it tell of?" of. Kulgan once more looked at Pug as if trying to see something inside of the boy, then said, "A long time ago, Pug, all these lands, from the Endless Sea across the Grey Tower Mountains to the Bitter Sea, were part of the Empire of Great Kesh. Far to the east existed a small kingdom, on one small island called Rillanon. It grew to engulf its neighboring island kingdoms, and it became the Kingdom of the Isles. Later it expanded again to the mainland, and while it is still the Kingdom of Isles, most of us simply call it 'the Kingdom.' We, who live in

Crydee, are part of the Kingdom, though we live as far from the capital city of Rillanon as one can and still be within its boundaries. "Once, many long years ago, the Empire of Great Kesh abandoned these lands, for it was engaged in a long and bloody conflict with its neighbors to the south, the Keshian Confederacy." Pug was caught up in the grandeur of lost empires, but hungry

enough to notice Meecham was putting several small loaves of dark bread in the hearth oven. He turned his attention back to the magician.

"Who were the Keshian Con- . . . ?"

"The Keshian Confederacy," Kulgan finished for the boy.

"It is a group of small nations who had existed as tributaries to Great Kesh for centuries. A dozen years before that book was written, they united against their oppressor. Each alone was insufficient to contest with Great Kesh, but united they proved its match. Too close a match, for the war dragged on year after year. The Empire was forced to strip its northern provinces of their legions and send them south, leaving the north open to the advances of the new, younger Kingdom. "It was Duke Borric's grandfather, youngest son of the King, who brought the army westward, extending the Western Realm. Since then all of what was once the old imperial province of Bosnia, except for the Free Cities of Natal, has been called the Duchy of Crydee."

Pug thought for a moment, then said, "I think I would like to travel to this Great Kesh someday." Meecham snorted, something close to a laugh. "And what would you be traveling as, a freebooter?" Pug felt his face flush.

Freebooters were landless men, mercenaries who fought for pay, and who were regarded as being only one cut above outlaws. Kulgan said, "Perhaps you might someday, Pug. The way is long and full of peril, but it is not unheard of for a brave and hearty soul to survive the journey. Stranger things have been known to happen." The talk at the table turned to more common topics, for the magician had been at the southern keep at Carse for over a month and wanted the gossip of Crydee. When the bread was done Baking, Meecham served it hot, carved the pork loin and brought out plates of cheese and greens. Pug had never eaten so well in his life. Even when he had

worked in the kitchen, his position as keep boy earned him only meager fare. Twice during dinner, Pug found the magician regarding him intently. When the meal was over, Meecham cleared the table, then began washing the dishes with clean sand and fresh water, while Kulgan and Pug sat talking. A single scrap of meat remained on the table, which Kulgan tossed over to Fantus, who lay before the fire. The drake opened one eye to regard the morsel. He pondered the choice between his comfortable resting place and the juicy scrap for a moment, then moved the necessary six inches to gulp down the prize and closed his eye again. Kulgan lit his pipe, and once he was satisfied with its production of smoke, he said, "What are your plans when you reach manhood, boy?" Pug was fighting off sleep, but Kulgan's question brought him alert again. The time of Choosing, when the boys of the town and keep were taken into apprenticeship, was close, and Pug became excited as he said, "This Midsummer's Day I hope to take the Duke's service under

Swordmaster Fannon."

Kulgan regarded his slight guest. "I would have thought you still a year or two away from apprenticeship, Pug."

Meecham gave out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a grunt.

"Bit small to be lugging around sword and shield, aren't you, boy?"

Pug flushed. He was the smallest boy of his age in the castle. "Mear the cook said I may be late coming to my growth," he said with a faint note of defiance. "No one knows who my parents were, so they have no notion of what to expect."

"Orphan, is it?" asked Meecham, raising one eyebrow, his most expressive gesture yet.

Pug nodded. "I was left with the Priests of Dala, in the mountain by a woman who claimed she found me in the road. They brought me to the keep, for they had no way to care for me."

"Yes," injected Kulgan, "I remember when those who worship the

Shield of the Weak first brought you to the castle. You were no more than a baby fresh from the teat. It is only through the Duke's kindness that you are a freeman today. He felt it a lesser evil to free a bondsman's son than to bond a freeman's. Without proof, it was his right to have you declared bondsman." Meecham said in a noncommittal tone, "A good man, the Duke." Pug had heard the story of his origin a hundred times before from Magya in the kitchen of the castle. He felt completely wrung out and could barely keep his eyes open. Kulgan noticed and signaled Meecham. The tall franklin took some blankets from a shelf and prepared a sleeping pallet. By the time he finished, Pug had fallen asleep with his head on the table. The large man's hands lifted him gently from the stool and placed him on the blankets, then covered him. Fantus opened his eyes and regarded the sleeping boy. With a wolfish yawn, he scrambled over next to Pug and snuggled in close. Pug shifted his weight in his sleep and draped one arm over the drake's neck. The fire-drake gave an approving rumble, deep in his throat, and closed his eyes again.

2

APPRENTICE

THE FOREST WAS QUIET.

The slight afternoon breeze stirred the tall oaks and cut the day's heat, while rustling the leaves only slightly. Birds who would raise a raucous chorus at sunrise and sundown were mostly quiet at this time of morning. The faint tang of sea salt mixed with the sweet smell of flowers and pungency of decaying leaves. Pug and Tomas walked slowly along the path, with the aimless weaving steps of boys who have no particular place to go and ample time to get there. Pug shied a small rock at an imagined target, then turned to look at his companion. "You don't think your mother was mad, do you?" he asked. Tomas smiled. "No, she understands how things are. She's seen other boys the day of Choosing. And truthfully, we were more of hindrance than a help in the kitchen today." Pug nodded. He had spilled a precious pot of honey as he carried it to Alfon, the

pastrycook. Then he had dumped an entire tray of fresh bread loaves as he took them from the oven. "I made something of a fool of myself today, Tomas." Tomas laughed. He was a tall boy, with sandy hair and bright blue eyes. With his quick smile, he was well liked in the keep, in spite of a boyish tendency to find trouble. He was Pug's closest friend, more brother than friend, and for that reason Pug earned some measure of acceptance from the other boys, for they all regarded Tomas as their unofficial leader. Tomas said, "You were no more the fool than I. At least you didn't forget to hang the beef sides high." Pug grinned. "Anyway, the Duke's hounds are happy." He snickered, then laughed. "She is angry, isn't she?" Tomas laughed along with his friend. "She's mad. Still, the dogs only ate a little before she shooed them off. Besides, she's mostly mad at Father. She claims the Choosing's only an excuse for all the Craftmasters to sit around smoking pipes, drinking ale, and swapping tales all day. She says they already know who will choose which boy." Pug said, "From what the other women say, she's not alone in that opinion." Then he grinned at Tomas. "Probably not wrong, either." Tomas lost his smile. "She truly doesn't like it when he's not in the kitchen to oversee things. I think she knows this, which is why she tossed us out of the keep for the morning, so she wouldn't take out her temper on us. Or at least you," he added with a questioning smile. "I swear you're her favorite." pug's grin returned and he laughed again. "Well, I do cause less trouble." With a playful punch to the arm, Tomas said, "You mean you get caught less often." Pug pulled his sling out from within his shirt. "If we came back with a brace of partridge or quail, she might regain some of her good temper." Tomas smiled. "She might," he agreed, taking out his own sling. Both boys were excellent slingers, Tomas being undoubted champion among the boys, edging Pug by only a little. It was unlikely either could bring down a bird on the wing, but should they find one at rest, there was a fair chance they might hit it. Besides, it would give them something to do to pass the hours and perhaps for a time forget the Choosing. With exaggerated stealth they crept along, playing the part of hunters. Tomas led the way as they left the footpath, heading for the watering pool they knew lay not too far distant. It was improbable they would spot game this time of the day unless they simply blundered across it, but if any were to be found, it most likely would be near the pool. The woods to the northeast of the town of Crydee were less forbidding than the great forest to the south.

Many years of harvesting trees for lumber had given <sup>3</sup>the green glades a sunlit airiness not found in the deep haunts of the southern forest. The keep boys had often played here over the years. With small imagination, the woods were transformed into a wondrous place, a green world of high adventure. Some of the greatest deeds known had taken place here. Daring escapes, dread quests, and mightily contested battles had been witnessed by the silent trees as the boys gave vent to their youthful dreams of coming manhood. Foul creatures, mighty monsters, and base outlaws had all been fought and vanquished, often accompanied by the death of a great hero, with appropriate last words to his mourning companions, all managed with just enough time left to return to the keep for supper. Tomas reached a small rise that overlooked the pool, screened off by young beech saplings, and pulled aside some brush so they could mount a vigil. He stopped, awed,

and softly said,  
"Pug, look!"

Standing at the edge of the pool was a stag, head held high as he sought the source of something that disturbed his drinking. He was an old animal, the hair around his muzzle nearly all white, and his head crowned by magnificent antlers. Pug counted quickly. "He has fourteen points." Tomas nodded agreement. "He must be the oldest buck in the forest."

The stag turned his attention in the boys' direction, flicking an ear nervously. They froze, not wishing to frighten off such a beautiful creature.

For a long, silent minute the stag studied the rise, nostrils flaring, then slowly lowered his head to the pool and drank. Tomas gripped Pug's shoulder and inclined his head to one side. Pug followed Tomas's motion and saw a figure walking silently into the clearing. He was a tall man dressed in leather clothing, dyed forest green. Across his back hung a longbow and at his belt a hunter's knife. His green cloak's hood was thrown back, and he walked toward the stag with a steady, even step. Tomas said, "It's Martin."

Pug also recognized the Duke's Huntmaster. An orphan like Pug, Martin had come to be known as Longbow by those in the castle, as he had few equals with that weapon. Something of a mystery, Martin Longbow was still well liked by the boys, for while he was aloof with the adults in the castle, he was always friendly and accessible to the boys. As Huntmaster, he was also the Duke's Forester. His duties absented him from the castle for days, even weeks at a time, as he kept his trackers busy looking for signs of poaching, possible fire dangers, migrating goblins, or outlaws camping in the woods. But when he was in the castle, and not organizing a hunt for the Duke, he always had time for the boys. His dark eyes were always merry when they pestered him with questions of woodlore or for tales of the lands near the boundaries of Crydee. He seemed to possess unending patience, which set him apart from most of the Craftmasters in the town and keep. Martin came up to the stag, gently reached out, and touched his neck. The great head swung up, and the stag nuzzled Martin's arm.

Softly Martin said, "If you walk out slowly, without speaking, he might let you approach." Pug and Tomas exchanged startled glances, then stepped into the clearing. They walked slowly around the edge of the pool, the stag following their movements with his head, trembling slightly. Martin patted him reassuringly and he quieted. Tomas and Pug came to stand beside the hunter, and Martin said, "Reach out and touch him, slowly so as not to frighten him." Tomas reached out first, and the stag trembled beneath his fingers. Pug began to reach out, and the stag retreated a step. Martin crooned to the stag in a language Pug had never heard before, and the animal stood still. Pug touched him and marveled at the feel of his coat—so like the cured hides he had touched before, yet so different for the feel of life pulsing under his fingertips. Suddenly the stag backed off and turned. Then, with a single bounding leap, he was gone among the trees. Martin Longbow chuckled and said, "Just as well. It wouldn't do to have him become too friendly with men. Those antlers would quickly end up over some poacher's fireplace. "

Tomas whispered, "He's beautiful, Martin." Longbow nodded, his eyes still fastened upon the spot where the stag had vanished into the woods. "That he

is, Tomas." Pug said, "I thought you hunted stags, Martin. How-" Martin said, "Old Whitebeard and I have something of an understanding, Pug. I hunt only bachelor stags, without does, or does too old to calve. When Whitebeard loses his harem to some younger buck someday, I may take him. Now each leaves the other to his own way. The day will come when I will look at him down the shaft of an arrow." He smiled at the boys. "I won't know until then if I shall let the shaft fly. Perhaps I will, perhaps not." He fell silent for a time, as if the thought of Whitebeard's becoming old was saddening. Then as a light breeze rustled the branches said, "Now, what brings two such bold hunters into the Duke's woods in the early morning? There must be a thousand things left undone with the Midsummer festival this afternoon.

Tomas answered. "My mother tossed us out of the kitchen. We were more trouble than not. With the Choosing today . . ." His voice died away, and he felt suddenly embarrassed. Much of Martin's mysterious reputation stemmed from when he first came to Crydee. At his time for the Choosing, he had been placed directly with the old Huntmaster by the Duke, rather than standing before the assembled Craftmasters with the other boys his age. This violation of one of the oldest traditions known had offended many people in town, though none would dare openly express such feelings to Lord Borric. As was natural, Martin became the object of their ire, rather than the Duke. Over the years Martin had more than justified Lord Borric's decision, but still most people were troubled by the Duke's special treatment of him that one day. Even after twelve years some people still regarded Martin Longbow as being different and, as such, worthy of distrust. Tomas said, "I'm sorry, Martin." Martin nodded in acknowledgment, but without humor. "I understand, Tomas. I may not have had to endure your uncertainty, but I have seen many others wait for the day of Choosing. And for four years I myself have stood with the other Masters, so I know a little of your worry." A thought struck Pug and he blurted, "But you're not with the other Craftmasters."

Martin shook his head, a rueful expression playing across his even features. "I had thought that, in light of your worry, you might fail to observe the obvious. But you've a sharp wit about you, Pug." Tomas didn't understand what they were saying for a moment, then comprehension dawned. "Then you'll accept no apprentices!" Martin raised a finger to his lips. "Not a word, lad. No, with young Garret chosen last year, I've a full company of trackers." Tomas was disappointed. He wished more than anything to take service with Swordmaster Fannon, but should he not be chosen as a soldier, then he would prefer the life of a forester, under Martin. Now his second choice was denied him. After a moment of dark brooding, he brightened: perhaps Martin didn't choose him because Fannon already had. Seeing his friend entering a cycle of elation and depression as he considered all the possibilities, Pug said, "You haven't been in the keep for nearly a month, Martin." He put away the sling he still held and asked, "Where have you kept yourself?" Martin looked at Pug as the boy instantly regretted his question. As friendly as Martin could be, he was still Huntmaster, a member of the Duke's household, and keep boys did not make a habit of questioning the comings and goings of the Duke's staff. Martin relieved Pug's embarrassment with a slight smile. "I've been to Elvandar. Queen Aglaranna has ended her twenty years of mourning the death of her



husband, the Elf King. There was a great celebration." Pug was surprised by the answer. To him, as to most people in

Crydee, the elves were little more than legend. But Martin had spent his youth near the elven forests and was one of the few humans to come and go through those forests to the north at will. It was another thing that set Martin Longbow apart from others. While Martin had shared elvish lore with the boys before, this was the first time in Pug's memory he had spoken of his relationship to the elves. Pug stammered, "You feasted with the Elf Queen?" Martin assumed a pose of modest inconsequence. "Well, I sat at the table farthest from the throne, but yes, I was there." Seeing the unasked questions in their eyes, he continued. "You know as a boy I was raised by the monks of Silban's Abbey, near the elven forest. I played with elven children, and before I came here, I hunted with Prince Calin and his cousin, Galain." Tomas nearly jumped with excitement. Elves were a subject holding particular fascination for him. "Did you know King Aidan?" Martin's expression clouded, and his eyes narrowed, his manner suddenly becoming stiff. Tomas saw Martin's reaction and said, "I'm sorry, Martin. Did I say something wrong?" Martin waved away the apology. "No fault of yours, Tomas," he said, his manner softening somewhat. "The elves do not use the names of those who have gone to the Blessed Isles, especially those who have died untimely. They believe to do so recalls those spoken of from their journey there, denying them their final rest. I respect their beliefs.

"Well, to answer you, no, I never met him. He was killed when I was only a small boy. But I have heard the stories of his deeds, and he was a good and wise King by all accounts." Martin looked about. "It approaches noon. We should return to the keep." He began to walk toward the path, and the boys fell in beside him. "What was the feast like, Martin?" asked Tomas. Pug sighed as the hunter began to speak of the marvels of Elvandar. He was also fascinated by tales of the elves, but to nowhere near the degree Tomas was. Tomas could endure hours of tales of the people of the elven forests, regardless of the speaker's credibility. At least, Pug considered, in the Huntmaster they had a dependable eye witness. Martin's voice droned on, and Pug's attention wandered, as he again found himself pondering the Choosing.

No matter that he told himself worry was useless: he worried. He found he was facing the approaching of this afternoon with something akin to dread.

THE BOYS STOOD in the courtyard. It was Midsummer, the day that ended one year and marked the beginning of another. Today everyone in the castle would be counted one year older. For the milling boys this was significant, for today was the last day of their boyhood. Today was the Choosing. Pug tugged at the collar of his new tunic. It wasn't really new, being one of Tomas's old ones, but it was the newest Pug had ever owned. Magya, Tomas's mother, had taken it in for the smaller boy, to ensure he was presentable before the Duke and his court. Magya and her husband, Megar the cook, were as close to being parents to the orphan as anyone in the keep. They tended his ills, saw that he was fed, and boxed his ears when he deserved it. They also loved him as if he were Tomas's brother. Pug

looked around. The other boys all wore their best, for this was one of the most important days of their young lives. Each would stand before the assembled Craftmasters and members of the Duke's staff, and each would be considered for an apprentice's post. It was a ritual, its origins lost in time, for the choices had already been made. The crafters and the Duke's staff had spent many hours discussing each boy's merits with one another and knew which boys they would call. The practice of having the boys between eight and thirteen years of age work in the crafts and services had proved a wise course over the years in fitting the best suited to each craft. In addition, it provided a pool of semiskilled individuals for the other crafts should the need arise. The drawback to the system was that certain boys were not chosen for a craft or staff position. Occasionally there would be too many boys for a single position, or no lad judged fit even though there was an opening. Even when the number of boys and openings seemed well matched, as it did this year, there were no guarantees. For those who stood in doubt, it was an anxious time. Pug scuffed his bare feet absently in the dust. Unlike Tomas, who seemed to do well at anything he tried, Pug was often guilty of trying too hard and bungling his tasks. He looked around and noticed that a few of the other boys also showed signs of tension. Some were joking roughly, pretending no concern over whether they were chosen or not. Others stood like Pug, lost in their thoughts, trying not to dwell on what they would do should they not be chosen. If he was not chosen, Pug-like the others-would be free to leave Crydee to try to find a craft in another town or city. If he stayed, he would have to either farm the Duke's land as a franklin, or work one of the town's fishing boats. Both prospects were equally unattractive, but he couldn't imagine leaving Crydee.

Pug remembered what Megar had told him, the night before. The old cook had cautioned him about fretting too much over the Choosing. After all, he had pointed out, there were many apprentices who never advanced to the rank of journeyman. In fact, if he took account, there were more men who refused to be chosen than those who were. Megar had glossed over the fact that many fishers' and farmers' sons forsook the choosing, electing to follow their fathers.

Pug wondered if Megar was so removed from his own Choosing he couldn't remember that the boys who were not chosen would stand before the assembled company of Craftmasters, householders, and newly chosen apprentices, under their gaze until the last name was called and they were dismissed in shame. Biting his lower lip, Pug tried to hide his nervousness. He was not the sort to jump from the heights of Sailor's Grief should he not be chosen, as some had done in the past, but he couldn't bear the idea of facing those who had been chosen. Tomas, who stood next to his shorter friend, threw Pug a smile. He knew Pug was fretting, but could not feel entirely sympathetic as his own excitement mounted. His father had admitted that he would be the first called by Swordmaster Fannon. Moreover, the Swordmaster had confided that should Tomas do well in training, he might be found a place in the Duke's personal guard. It would be a signal honor and would improve Tomas's chance for advancement, even earning him an officer's rank after fifteen or twenty years in the guard. He poked Pug in the ribs with an elbow, for the Duke's Herald had come out upon the balcony overlooking the courtyard.

The herald signaled to a guard, who opened the small door in the great gate, and the Craftmasters entered. They crossed to stand at the foot of the broad stairs of the keep. As was traditional, they stood with their backs to the boys, waiting upon the Duke. The large oaken doors of the keep began to swing out ponderously, and several guards in the Duke's brown and gold darted through to take up their positions on the steps. Upon each tabard was emblazoned the golden gull of Crydee, and above that a small golden crown, marking the Duke a member of the royal family. The herald shouted, "Hearken to me! His Grace, Borric conDoin,

third Duke of Crydee, Prince of the Kingdom, Lord of Crydee, Carse, and Tulan; Warden of the West; Knight-General of the King's Armies, heir presumptive to the throne of Rillanon." The Duke stood patiently while the list of offices was completed, then stepped forward into the sunlight. Past fifty, the Duke of Crydee still moved with the fluid grace and powerful step of a born warrior. Except for the grey at the temples of his dark brown hair, he looked younger than his age by twenty years. He was dressed from neck to boot in black, as he had been for the last seven years, for he still mourned the loss of his beloved wife, Catherine. At his side hung a black-scabbarded sword with a silver hilt, and upon his hand his ducal signet ring, the only ornamentation he permitted himself. The herald raised his voice. "Their Royal Highnesses, the Princes Lyam conDoin and Arutha conDoin, heirs to the House of Crydee,

Knight-Captains of the King's Army of the West, Princes of the royal house of Rillanon." Both sons stepped forward to stand behind their father. The two young men were six and four years older than the apprentices, the Duke having wed late, but the difference between the awkward candidates for apprenticeship and the sons of the Duke was much more than a few years in age.

Both Princes appeared calm and self-possessed. Lyam, the elder, stood on his father's right, a blond, powerfully built man. His open smile was the image of his mother's, and he looked always on the verge of laughter. He was dressed in a bright blue tunic and yellow leggings and wore a closely trimmed beard, as blond as his shoulder-length hair. Arutha was to shadows and night as Lyam was to light and day. He stood nearly as tall as his brother and father, but while they were powerfully built, he was rangy to the point of gauntness. He wore a brown tunic and russet leggings. His hair was dark and his face clean-shaven. Everything about Arutha gave one the feeling of quickness. His strength was in his speed: speed with the rapier, speed with wit. His humor was dry and often sharp. While Lyam was openly loved by the Duke's subjects, Arutha was respected and admired for his ability, but not regarded with warmth by the people. Together the two sons seemed to capture most of the complex nature of their sire, for the Duke was capable of both Lyam's robust humor and Arutha's dark moods. They were nearly opposites in temperament, but both capable men who would benefit the Duchy and Kingdom in years to come. The Duke loved both his sons. The herald again spoke. "The Princess Carlina, daughter of the royal house." The slim and graceful girl who made her entrance was the same age as the boys who stood below, but already beginning to show the poise and grace of one born to rule and the beauty of her late mother. Her soft yellow gown

contrasted strikingly with her nearly black hair. Her eyes were Lyam's blue, as their mother's had been, and Lyam beamed when his sister took their father's arm. Even Arutha ventured one of his rare half smiles, for his sister was dear to him also. Many boys in the keep harbored a secret love for the Princess, a fact

she often turned to her advantage when there was mischief afoot. But even her presence could not drive the day's business from their minds. The Duke's court then entered. Pug and Tomas could see that all the members of the Duke's staff were present, including Kulgan. Pug had glimpsed him in the castle from time to time since the night of the storm, and they had exchanged words once, Kulgan inquiring as to his well-being, but mostly the magician was absent from sight. Pug was a little surprised to see the magician, for he was not properly considered a full member of the Duke's household, but rather a sometime adviser. Most of the time Kulgan was ensconced in his tower, hidden from view as he did whatever magicians do in such places. The magician was deep in conversation with Father Tully, a priest of Astalon the Builder and one of the Duke's oldest aides. Tully had been adviser to the Duke's father and had seemed old then. He now appeared ancient—at least to Pug's youthful perspective—but his eyes betrayed no sign of senility. Many a keep boy had been impaled upon the pointed gaze of those clear grey eyes. His wit and tongue were equally youthful, and more than once a keep boy had wished for a session with Horsemaster Algon's leather strap rather than a tongue-lashing from Father Tully. The white-haired priest could nearly strip the skin from a miscreant's back with his caustic words. Nearby stood one who had experienced Tully's wrath upon occasion, Squire Roland, son of Baron Tolburt of Tulan, one of the Duke's vassals. He was companion to both Princes, being the only other boy of noble birth in the keep. His father had sent him to Crydee the year before, to learn something of the management of the Duchy and the ways of the Duke's court. In the rather rough frontier court Roland discovered a home away from home. He was already something of a rogue when he arrived, but his infectious sense of humor and ready wit often eased much of the anger that resulted from his prankish ways. It was Roland, more often than not, who was Princess Carlina's accomplice in whatever mischief she was embarked upon. With light brown hair and blue eyes, Roland stood tall for his age. He was a year older than the gathered boys and had played often with them over the last year, as Lyam and Arutha were frequently busy with court duties. Tomas and he had been boyish rivals at first, then fast friends, with Pug becoming his friend by default, because where Tomas was, Pug was certain to be nearby. Roland saw Pug fidgeting near the edge of the assembled boys and gave him a slight nod and wink. Pug grinned briefly, for while he was as often the butt of Roland's jokes as any other, he still found himself liking the wild young Squire.

After all his court was in attendance, the Duke spoke. "Yesterday was the last day of the eleventh year of the reign of our Lord King, Rodric the Fourth. Today is the Festival of Banapis. The following day will find these boys gathered here counted among the men of Crydee, boys no longer, but apprentices and freemen. At this time it is proper for me to inquire if any among you wishes to be released from service to the Duchy. Are there any among you who so wish?" The question was

formal in nature and no response was expected, for few ever wished to leave Crydee. But one boy did step forward. The herald asked, "Who seeks release of his service?" The boy looked down, clearly nervous. Clearing his throat, he said, "I am Robert, son of Hugen." Pug knew him, but not well. He was a netmender's son, a town boy, and they rarely mixed with the keep boys. Pug had played with him upon a few occasions and had a sense the lad was well regarded. It was a rare thing to refuse service, and Pug was as curious as any to hear the reasons. The Duke spoke kindly. "What is your purpose, Robert, son of Hugen?"

"Your grace, my father is unable to take me into his craft, for my four brothers are well able to ascend to the craft as journeymen and masters after him, as are many other netmender's sons. My eldest brother is now married and has a son of his own, so my family no longer has room for me in the house. If I may not stay with my family and practice my father's craft, I beg your grace's leave to take service as a sailor." The Duke considered the matter. Robert was not the first village boy to be called by the lure of the sea. "Have you found a master willing to take you into his company?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Captain Gregson, master of the ship Green Deep from Margrave's Port is willing."

"I know this man," said the Duke. Smiling slightly he said, "He is a good and fair man. I recommend you into his service and wish you well in your travels. You will be welcomed at Crydee whenever you return with your ship." Robert bowed, a

little stiffly, and left the courtyard, his part in the Choosing done. Pug wondered at Robert's adventuresome choice. In less than a minute the boy had renounced his ties with his family and home and was now a citizen of a city he had never seen. It was custom that a sailor was considered to owe his loyalty to the city that was his ship's home port. Margrave's port was one of the Free Cities of Natal, on the Bitter Sea, and was now Robert's home. The Duke indicated the herald should continue.

The herald announced the first of the Craftmasters, Sailmaker Holm, who called the names of three boys. All three took service, and none seemed displeased. The choosing went smoothly, as no boy refused service. Each boy went to stand next to his new master. As the afternoon wore on and the number of boys diminished, Pug became more and more uncomfortable. Soon there were only two boys besides Pug and Tomas standing in the center of the court. All the Craftmasters had called their apprentices, and only two of the Duke's household staff beside the Swordmaster had not been heard from. Pug studied the group on the top of the steps, his heart pounding with anxiety. The two Princes regarded the boys, Lyam with a friendly smile, Arutha brooding on some thought or another. The Princess Carline was bored by the entire affair and took little pains to hide the fact, as she was whispering to Roland. This brought a disapproving look from Lady Marna, her governess. Horsemaster Algon came forth, his brown-and-gold tabard bearing a small horsehead embroidered over his left breast. The Horsemaster called the name of Rulf, son of Dick, and the stocky son of the Duke's stableman walked over to stand behind the master. When he turned, he smiled condescendingly at Pug. The two boys had never gotten along, the pock-scarred boy spending many hours taunting and tormenting Pug. While they both worked in the stable under Dick, the stableman had looked the

other way whenever his son sprang a trap on Pug, and the orphan was always held responsible for any difficulty that arose.

It had been a terrible period for Pug, and the boy had vowed to refuse service rather than face the prospect of working next to Rulf the rest of his life. Housecarl Samuel called the other boy, Geoffry, who would become a member of the castle's serving staff, leaving Pug and Tomas standing alone. Swordmaster Fannon then stepped forward, and Pug felt his heart stand still as the old soldier called, "Tomas, son of Megar." There was a pause, and Pug waited to hear his own name called, but Fannon stepped back and Tomas crossed over to stand alongside him.

Pug felt dwarfed by the gaze of all upon him. The courtyard was now larger than he had ever remembered it, and he felt ill fashioned and poorly dressed. His heart sank in his chest as he realized that there was no Craftmaster or staff member present who had not taken an apprentice. He would be the only boy uncalled. Fighting back tears, he waited for the Duke to dismiss the company. As the Duke started to speak, sympathy for the boy showing clearly in his face, he was interrupted by another voice. "Your Grace, if you would be so kind."

All eyes turned to see Kulgan the magician step forward. "I have need of an apprentice and would call Pug, orphan of the keep, to service." A wave of murmuring swept through the assembled Craftmasters. A few voices could be heard saying it wasn't proper for a magician to participate in the Choosing. The Duke silenced them with a sweep of his gaze, his face stern. No Craftmaster would challenge the Duke of Crydee, the third-ranking noble in the Kingdom, over the standing of one boy. Slowly all eyes returned to regard the boy. The Duke said, "As Kulgan is a recognized master of his craft, it is his right to choose. Pug, orphan of the keep, will you take service?" Pug stood rigid. He had imagined himself leading the King's army into battle as a Knight-Lieutenant, or discovering someday he was the lost son of nobility. In his boyish imaginings he had sailed ships, hunted great monsters, and saved the nation. In quieter moments of reflection he had wondered if he would spend his life building ships, making pottery, or learning the trader's skill, and speculated on how well he would do in each of those crafts. But the one thing he never thought of, the one dream that had never captured his fantasies, was that of becoming a magician. He snapped out of his shocked state, aware the Duke patiently awaited his response. He looked at the faces of those before him. Father Tully gave him one of his rare smiles, as did Prince Arutha. Prince Lyam nodded a slight yes, and Kulgan regarded him intently. There were signs of worry upon the magician's face, and suddenly Pug decided. It might not be an entirely proper calling, but any craft was better than none. He stepped forward and caught his own heel with his other foot, and landed face down in the dust. Picking himself up, he half scrambled, half ran to the magician's side. The misstep broke the tension, and the Duke's booming laughter filled the courtyard. Flushing with embarrassment, Pug stood behind Kulgan. He looked around the broad girth of his new master and found the Duke watching, his expression tempered by a kind nod at the blushing Pug. The Duke turned back to those who stood waiting for the Choosing to end. "I declare that each boy present is now the charge of his master, to obey him in all matters within the laws of the Kingdom, and each shall be judged a true and proper man of Crydee. Let the apprentices attend their

masters. Until the feasting, I bid you all good day." He turned and presented his left arm to his daughter. She placed her hand lightly upon it and they passed into the keep between the ranks of the courtiers, who drew aside. The two Princes followed, and the others of the court. Pug saw Tomas leave in the direction of the guard barracks, behind Master Fannon. He turned his attention back to Kulgan, who was standing lost in thought. After a moment the magician said, "I trust neither of us has made a mistake this day."

"Sir?" Pug asked, not understanding the magician's meaning.

Kulgan waved one hand absently, causing his pale yellow robe to move like waves rippling over the sea. "It is no matter, boy. What's done is done. Let us make the best of things." He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come, let us retire to the tower where I reside. There is a small room below my own that should do for you. I had intended it for some project or another, but have never managed to find the time to prepare it." Pug stood in awe. "A room of my own?" Such a thing for an apprentice was unheard of. Most apprentices slept in the workrooms of their master, or protected herds, or the like.

Only when an apprentice became a journeyman was it usual for him to take private quarters. Kulgan arched one bushy eyebrow. "Of course. Can't have you underfoot all the time. I would never get anything done. Besides, magic requires solitude for contemplation. You will need to be untroubled as much as or perhaps more than I will." He took out his long, thin pipe from a fold of his robe and started to stuff it full of tabac from a pouch that had also come from within the robe. "Let's not bother with too much discussion of duties and such, boy. For in truth, I am not prepared for you. But in short order I will have things well in hand. Until then we can use the time by becoming acquainted with one another. Agreed?" Pug was startled. He had little notion of what a magician was about, in spite of the night spent with Kulgan weeks ago, but he readily knew what Craftmasters were like, and none would have thought to inquire whether or not an apprentice agreed with his plans. Not knowing what to say, Pug just nodded. "Good, then," said Kulgan, "let us be off to the tower to find you some new clothes, and then we will spend the balance of the day feasting. Later there will be ample time to learn how to be master and apprentice." With a smile for the boy, the stout magician turned Pug around and led him away.

THE LATE AftERNOON was clear and bright, with a gentle breeze from the sea cooling the summer heat. Throughout the keep of Castle Crydee, and the town below, preparations for the Festival of Banapis were in progress. Banapis was the oldest known holiday, its origins lost in antiquity. It was held each Midsummer's Day, a day belonging to neither the past nor the coming year. Banapis, known by other names in other nations, was celebrated over the entire world of Midkemia according to legend. It was believed by some that the festival was borrowed from the elves and dwarves, for the long-lived races were said to have celebrated the feast of Midsummer as far back as the memory of both races could recall. Most authorities disputed this allegation, citing no reason other than the unlikelihood of humans borrowing anything from the elven or dwarven folk. It was rumored that even the denizens of the Northlands, the goblin tribes

and the clans of the Brotherhood of the Dark Path, celebrated Banapis, though no one had ever reported seeing such a celebration. The courtyard was busy.

Huge tables had been erected to hold the myriad varieties of foods that had been in preparation for over a week. Giant barrels of dwarven ale, imported from Stone Mountain, had been hauled out of the cellars and were resting on protesting, overburdened wood frames. The workmen, alarmed at the fragile appearance of the barrel ricks, were quickly emptying some of the contents. Megar came out of the kitchen and angrily shooed them away. "Leave off, there will be none left for the evening meal at this rate! Back to the kitchen, dolts! There is much work to be done yet." The workers went off, grumbling, and Megar filled a tankard to ensure the ale was at proper temperature. After he drained it dry and satisfied himself that all was as it should be, he returned to the kitchen. There was no formal beginning to the feast. Traditionally, people and food, wine and ale, all accumulated until they reached a certain density, then all at once the festivities would be in full swing.

Pug ran from the kitchen. His room in the northmost tower, the magician's tower as it had become known, provided him with a shortcut through the kitchen, which he used rather than the main doors of the keep. He beamed as he sped across the courtyard in his new tunic and trousers. He had never worn such finery and was in a hurry to show his friend Tomas. He found Tomas leaving the soldiers' commons, nearly as much in a hurry as Pug. When the two met, they both spoke at once. "Look at the new tunic-" said Pug. "Look at my soldier's tabard-" said Tomas. Both stopped and broke into laughter. Tomas regained his composure first. "Those are very fine clothes, Pug," he said, fingering the expensive material of Pug's red tunic. "And the color suits you."

Pug returned the compliment, for Tomas did cut a striking figure in his brown-and-gold tabard. It was of little consequence that he wore his regular homespun tunic and trousers underneath. He would not receive a soldier's uniform until Master Fannon was satisfied with his worthiness as a man-at-arms. The two friends wandered from one heavily laden table to another. Pug's mouth watered from the rich fragrances in the air. They came to a table heaped with meat pies, steam rising from their hot crusts, pungent cheeses, and hot bread. At the table a young kitchen boy was stationed with a shoo-fly. His job was to keep pests from the food, whether of the insect variety or the chronically hungry apprentice variety. Like most other situations involving boys, the relationship between this guardian of the feast and the older apprentices was closely bound by tradition. It was considered ill-mannered and in poor taste merely to threaten or bully the smaller boy into parting with food before the start of the feast. But it was considered fair to use guile, stealth, or speed in gaining a prize from the table. Pug and Tomas observed with interest as the boy, named Jon, delivered a wicked whack to the hand of one young apprentice seeking to snag a large pie. With a nod of his head, Tomas sent Pug to the far side of the table. Pug ambled across Jon's field of vision, and the boy watched him carefully. Pug moved abruptly, a feint toward the table, and Jon leaned in his direction. Then suddenly Tomas snatched a puff-pastry from the table and was gone before the shoo-fly lash began to descend. As they ran from the table, Pug and Tomas could



hear the distressed cries of the boy whose table they had plundered. Tomas gave Pug half the pie when they were safely away, and the smaller apprentice laughed. "You're the quickest hand in the castle, I bet."  
"Or young Jon was slow of eye for keeping it on you."

They shared a laugh. Pug popped his half of the pie into his mouth. It was delicately seasoned, and the contrast between the salty pork filling and the sweet puff-pastry crust was delicious. The sound of pipes and drums came from the side courtyard as the Duke's musicians approached the main courtyard. By the time they had emerged around the keep, a silent message seemed to pass through the crowd. Suddenly the kitchen boys were busy handing out wooden platters for the celebrants to heap food upon, and mugs of ale and wine were being drawn from the barrels. The boys dashed to a place in line at the first table. Pug and Tomas used their size and quickness to good advantage, darting through the throng, snagging food of every description and a large mug of foamy ale each. They found a relatively quiet corner and fell to with ravenous hunger. Pug tasted his first drink of ale and was surprised at the robust, slightly bitter taste. It seemed to warm him as it went down, and after another experimental taste he decided that he liked it.

Pug could see the Duke and his family mingling with the common folk. Other members of his court could also be seen standing in line before the tables. There was no ceremony, ritual, or rank observed this afternoon. Each was served as he arrived, for Midsummer's Day was the time when all would equally share in the bounties of the harvest. Pug caught a glimpse of the Princess and felt his chest tighten a little. She looked radiant as many of the boys in the courtyard complimented her on her appearance. She wore a lovely gown of deep blue and a simple, broad-brimmed hat of the same color. She thanked each author of a flattering remark and used her dark eyelashes and bright smile to good advantage, leaving a wake of infatuated boys behind. Jugglers and clowns made their appearance in the courtyard, the first of many groups of traveling performers who were in the town for the festival. The actors of another company had set up a stage in the town square and would give a performance in the evening. Until the early hours of the next morning the festivities would continue. Pug knew that many of the boys the year before had to be excused duty the day following Banapis, for their heads and stomachs were in no condition for honest work. He was sure that scene would be repeated tomorrow. Pug looked forward to the evening, for it was the custom for new apprentices to visit many of the houses in the town, receiving congratulations and mugs of ale. It was also a ripe time for meeting the town girls. While dalliance was not unknown, it was frowned upon. But mothers tended to be less vigilant during Banapis. Now that the boys had crafts, they were viewed less as bothersome pests and more as potential sons-in-law, and there had been more than one case of a mother looking the other way while a daughter used her natural gifts to snare a young husband. Pug, being of small stature and youthful appearance, got little notice from the girls of the keep. Tomas, however, was more and more the object of girlish flirtation as he grew in size and good looks, and lately Pug had begun to be aware that his friend was being sized up by one or another of the castle girls. Pug was still young enough to think the whole thing silly, but old enough to be fascinated by it. Pug chewed an improbable mouthful and looked around. People from the town and

keep passed, offering congratulations on the boys' apprenticeship and wishing them a good new year. Pug felt a deep sense of rightness about everything. He was an apprentice, even if Kulgan seemed completely unsure of what to do with him. He was well fed, and on his way to being slightly intoxicated-which contributed to his sense of well-being. And, most important, he was among friends. There can't be much more to life than this, he thought.

3

KEEP

Pug sAT SULKING ON HIS SLEEPING PAIET.

Fantus the firedrake pushed his head forward, inviting Pug to scratch him behind his eye ridges. Seeing that he would get little satisfaction, the drake made his way to the tower window and with a snort of displeasure, complete with a small puff of black smoke, launched himself in flight. Pug didn't notice the creature's leaving, so engrossed was he in his own world of troubles. Since he had taken on the position of Kulgan's apprentice fourteen months ago, everything he had done seemed to go wrong. He lay back on the pallet, covering his eyes with a forearm. He could smell the salty sea breeze that blew in through his window and feel the sun's warmth across his legs. Everything in his life had taken a turn for the better since his apprenticeship, except the single most important thing, his studies. For months Kulgan had been laboring to teach him the fundamentals of the magician's arts, but there was always something that caused his efforts to go awry. In the theories of spell casting, Pug was a quick study, grasping the basic concepts well. But each time he attempted to use his knowledge, something seemed to hold him back. It was as if a part of his mind refused to follow through with the magic, as if a block existed that prevented him from passing a certain point in the spell. Each time he tried he could feel himself approach that point, and like a rider of a balky horse, he couldn't seem to force himself over the hurdle. Kulgan dismissed his worries, saying that it would all sort itself out in time. The stout magician was always sympathetic with the boy, never reprimanding him for not doing better, for he knew the boy was trying. Pug was brought out of his reverie by someone's opening the door. Looking up, he saw Father Tully entering, a large book under his arm. The cleric's white robes rustled as he closed the door. Pug sat up. "Pug, it's time for your writing lesson-" He stopped himself when he saw the downcast expression of the boy. "What's the matter, lad?" Pug had come to like the old priest of Astalon. He was a strict master, but a fair one. He would praise the boy for his success as often as scold him for his failures. He had a quick mind and a sense of humor and was open to questions, no matter how stupid Pug thought they might sound. Coming to his feet, Pug sighed. "I don't know, Father. It's just that things don't seem to be going right. Everything I try I manage to make a mess of."

"Pug, it can't be all black," the priest said, placing a hand on Pug's shoulder. "Why don't you tell me what is troubling you, and we can

practice writing some other time." He moved to a stool by the window and adjusted his robes around him as he sat. As he placed the large book at his feet, he studied the boy. Pug had grown over the last year, but was still small. His shoulders were beginning to broaden a bit, and his face was showing signs of the man he would someday be. He was a dejected figure in his homespun tunic and trousers, his mood as grey as the material he wore. His room, which was usually neat and orderly, was a mess of scrolls and books, reflecting the disorder in his mind. Pug sat quietly for a moment, but when the priest said nothing, started to speak. "Do you remember my telling you that Kulgan was trying to teach me the three basic cantrips to calm the mind, so that the working of spells could be practiced without stress? Well, the truth is that I mastered those exercises months ago. I can bring my mind to a state of calm in moments now, with little effort. But that is as far as it goes. After that, everything seems to fall apart." "what do you mean?"

"The next thing to learn is to discipline the mind to do things that are not natural for it, such as think on one thing to the exclusion of everything else, or not to think of something, which is quite hard once you've been told what it is. I can do those things most of the time, but now and again I feel like there are some forces inside my head, crashing about, demanding that I do things in a different way. It's like there was something else happening in my head than what Kulgan told me to expect. "Each time I try one of the simple spells Kulgan has taught me, like making an object move, or lifting myself off the ground, these things in my head come flooding in on my concentration, and I lose my control. I can't even master the simplest spell." Pug felt himself tremble, for this was the first chance he had had to speak about this to anyone besides Kulgan. "Kulgan simply says to keep at it and not worry." Nearing tears, he continued. "I have talent. Kulgan said he knew it from the first time we met, when I used the crystal. You've told me that I have talent. But I just can't make the spells work the way they're supposed to. I get so confused by it all." "Pug," said the priest, "magic has many properties, and we understand little of how it works, even those of us who practice it. In the temples we are taught that magic is a gift from the gods, and we accept that on faith. We do not understand how this can be so, but we do not question. Each order has its own province of magic, with no two quite alike. I am capable of magic that those who follow other orders are not. But none can say why. "Magicians deal in a different sort of magic, and their practices are very different from our practices in the temples. Much of what they do, we cannot. It is they who study the art of magic, seeking its nature and workings, but even they cannot explain how magic works. They only know how to work it, and pass that knowledge along to their students, as Kulgan is doing with you."

"Trying to do with me, Father. I think he may have misjudged me."

"I think not, Pug. I have some knowledge of these things, and since you have become Kulgan's pupil, I have felt the power growing in you. Perhaps you will come to it late, as others have, but I am sure you will find the proper path." Pug was not comforted. He didn't question the priest's wisdom or his opinion, but he did feel he could be mistaken. "I

hope you're right, Father. I just don't understand what's wrong with me."

"I think I know what's wrong," came a voice from the door. Startled, Pug and Father Tully turned to see Kulgan standing in the doorway. His blue eyes were set in lines of concern, and his thick grey brows formed a V over the bridge of his nose. Neither Pug nor Tully had heard the door open. Kulgan hiked his long green robe and stepped into the room, leaving the door open. "Come here, Pug," said the magician with a small wave of his hand.

Pug went over to the magician, who placed both hands on his shoulders. "Boys who sit in their rooms day after day worrying about why things don't work make things not work. I am giving you the day for yourself. As it is Sixthday, there should be plenty of other boys to help you in whatever sort of trouble boys can find." He smiled, and his pupil was filled with relief. "You need a rest from study. Now go." So saying, he fetched a playful cuff to the boy's head, sending him running down the stairs. crossing over to the pallet, Kulgan lowered his heavy frame to it and looked at the priest. "Boys," said Kulgan, shaking his head. "You hold a festival, give them a badge of craft, and suddenly they expect to be men. But they're still boys, and no matter how hard they try, they still act like boys, not men." He took out his pipe and began filling it. "Magicians are considered young and inexperienced at thirty, but in all other crafts thirty would mark a man a journeyman or master, most likely readying his own son for the Choosing." He put a taper to the coals still smouldering in Pug's fire pot and lit his pipe. Tully nodded. "I understand, Kulgan. The priesthood also is an old man's calling. At Pug's age I still had thirteen years of being an acolyte before me." The old priest leaned forward. "Kulgan, what of the boy's problem?"

"The boy's right, you know," Kulgan stated flatly. "There is no explanation for why he cannot perform the skills I've tried to teach. The things he can do with scrolls and devices amaze me. The boy has such gifts for these things, I would have wagered he had the makings of a magician of mighty arts. But this inability to use his inner powers . . ."

"Do you think you can find a solution?"

"I hope so. I would hate to have to release him from apprenticeship. It would go harder on him than had I never chosen him." His face showed his genuine concern. "It is confusing, Tully. I think you'll agree he has the potential for a great talent. As soon as I saw him use the crystal in my hut that night, I knew for the first time in years I might have at last found my apprentice. When no master chose him, I knew fate had set our paths to cross. But there is something else inside that boy's head, something I've never met before, something powerful. I don't know what it is, Tully, but it rejects my exercises, as if they were somehow . . . not correct, or . . . ill suited to him. I don't know if I can explain what I've encountered with Pug any better. There is no simple explanation for it."

"Have you thought about what the boy said?" asked the priest, a look of thoughtful concern on his face. "You mean about my having been mistaken?" Tully nodded. Kulgan dismissed the question with a wave of his hand.

"Tully, you know as much about the nature of magic as I do, perhaps more. Your god is not called the God who Brought Order for nothing. Your sect

unrevealed much about what orders this universe. Do you for one moment doubt the boy has talent?"

"Talent, no. But his ability is the question for the moment."

"Well put, as usual. Well, then, have you any ideas? Should we make a cleric out of the boy, perhaps?" Tully sat back, a disapproving expression upon his face. "You know the priesthood is a calling, Kulgan," he said stiffly. "Put your back down, Tully. I was making a joke." He sighed. "Still, if he hasn't the calling of a priest, nor the knack of a magician's craft, what can we make of this natural ability of his?" Tully pondered the question in silence for a moment, then said, . "Have you thought of the lost art?" Kulgan's eyes widened. "That old legend?" Tully nodded. "I doubt there is a magician alive who at one time or another hasn't reflected on the legend of the lost art. If it had existed, it would explain away many of the shortcomings of our craft." Then he fixed Tully with a narrowed eye, showing his disapproval. "But legends are common enough. Turn up any rock on the beach and you'll find one. I for one prefer to look for real answers to our shortcomings, not blame them on ancient superstitions." Tully's expression became stern and his tone scolding. "We of the temple do not count it legend, Kulgan! It is considered part of the revealed truth, taught by the gods to the first men." Nettled by Tully's tone, Kulgan snapped, "So was the notion the world was flat, until Ro' lendirk-a magician, I'll remind you-sent his magic sight high enough to disclose the curvature of the horizon, clearly demonstrating the world to be a sphere! It was a fact known by almost every sailor and fisherman who'd ever seen a sail appear upon the horizon before the rest of the ship since the beginning of time!" His voice rose to a near shout. Seeing Tully was stung by the reference to ancient church canon long since abandoned, Kulgan softened his tone. "No disrespect to you, Tully. But don't try to teach an old thief to steal. I know your order chops logic with the best of them, and that half your brother clerics fall into laughing fits when they hear those deadly serious young acolytes debate theological issues set aside a century ago. Besides which, isn't the legend of the lost art an Ishapian dogma?"

Now it was Tully's turn to fix Kulgan with a disapproving eye. With a tone of amused exasperation, he said, "Your education in religion is still lacking, Kulgan, despite a somewhat unforgiving insight into the inner workings of my order." He smiled a little. "You're right about the moot gospel courts, though. Most of us find them so amusing because we remember how painfully grim we were about them when we were acolytes." Then turning serious, he said, "But I am serious when I say your education is lacking. The Ishapians have some strange beliefs, it's true, and they are an insular group, but they are also the oldest order known and are recognized as the senior church in questions pertaining to interdenominational differences."

"Religious wars, you mean," said Kulgan with an amused snort. Tully ignored the comment. "The Ishapians are caretakers for the oldest lore and history in the Kingdom, and they have the most extensive library in the Kingdom. I have visited the library at their temple in Krondor, and it is most impressive." Kulgan smiled and with a

slight tone of condescension said, "As have I, Tully, and I have browsed the shelves at the Abbey of Sarth, which is ten times as large. What's the point?"

Leaning forward, Tully said, "The point is this: say what you will about the Ishapians, but when they put forth something as history, not lore, they can usually produce ancient tomes to support their claims."

"No," said Kulgan, waving aside Tully's comments with a dismissive wave. "I do not make light of your beliefs, or any other man's, but I cannot accept this nonsense about lost arts. I might be willing to believe Pug could be somehow more attuned to some aspect of magic I'm ignorant of, perhaps something involving spirit conjuration or illusionareas I will happily admit I know little about-but I cannot accept that he will never learn to master his craft because the long-vanished god of magic died during the Chaos Wars! No, that there is unknown lore, I accept. There are too many shortcomings in our craft even to begin to think our understanding of magic is remotely complete. But if Pug can't learn magic, it is only because I have failed as a teacher." Tully now glared at Kulgan, suddenly aware the magician was not pondering Pug's possible shortcomings but his own. "Now you are being foolish. You are a gifted man, and were I to have been the one to discover Pug's talent, I could not imagine a better teacher to place him with than yourself. But there can be no failing if you do not know what he needs to be taught." Kulgan began to sputter an objection, but Tully cut him off. "No, let me continue. What we lack is understanding. You seem to forget there have been others like Pug, wild talents who could not master their gifts, others who failed as priests and magicians." Kulgan puffed on his pipe, his brow knitted in concentration. Suddenly he began to chuckle, then laugh. Tully looked sharply at the magician. Kulgan waved offhandedly with his pipe. "I was just struck by the thought that should a swineherd fail to teach his son the family calling, he could blame it upon the demise of the gods of pigs." Tully's eyes went wide at the near-blasphemous thought, then he too laughed, a short bark. "That's one for the moot gospel courts!" Both men laughed a long, tension-releasing laugh at that. Tully sighed and stood up. "Still, do not close your mind entirely to what I've said, Kulgan. It may be Pug is one of those wild talents. And you may have to reconcile yourself for letting him go." Kulgan shook his head sadly at the thought. "I refuse to believe there is any simple explanation for those other failures, Tully. Or for Pug's difficulties, as well. The fault was in each man or woman, not in the nature of the universe. I have often felt where we fail with Pug is in understanding how to reach him. perhaps I would be well advised to seek another master for him, place him with one better able to harness his abilities."

Tully sighed. "I have spoken my mind of this question, Kulgan. Other than what I've said, I cannot advise you. Still, as they say, a poor master's better than no master at all. How would the boy have fared if no one had chosen to teach him?" Kulgan bolted upright from his seat. "What did you say?"

"I said, how would the boy have fared if no one had chosen to teach him?" Kulgan's eyes seemed to lose focus as he stared into space. He began puffing furiously upon his pipe. After watching for a moment, Tully said, "What is it, Kulgan?" Kulgan said, "I'm not sure,

Tully, but you may have given me an idea."

"What sort of idea?" Kulgan

waved off the question. "I'm not entirely sure. Give me time to ponder. But consider your question, and ask yourself this: how did the first magicians learn to use their power?" Tully sat back down, and both men began to consider the question in silence. Through the window they could hear the sound of boys at play, filling the courtyard of the keep.

EvERY SixthdaY, the boys and girls who worked in the castle were allowed to spend the afternoon as they saw fit. The boys, apprentice age and younger, were a loud and boisterous lot. The girls worked in the service .of the ladies of the castle, cleaning and sewing, as well as helping in the kitchen. They all gave a full week's work, dawn to dusk and more, each day, but on the sixth day of the week they gathered in the courtyard of ! the castle, near the Princess's garden. Most of the boys played a rough game of tag, involving the capture of a ball of leather, stuffed hard with rags, by one side, amid shoves and shouts, kicks and occasional fistfights. All wore their oldest clothes, for rips, bloodstains, and mudstains were common. The girls would sit along the low wall by the Princess's garden, occupying themselves with gossip about the ladies of the Duke's court. They nearly always put on their best skirts and blouses, and their hair shone from washing and brushing. Both groups made a great display of ignoring each other, and both were equally unconvincing. Pug ran to where the game was in progress. As was usual, Tomas was in the thick of the fray, sandy hair flying like a banner, shouting and laughing above the noise. Amid blows and kicks he sounded savagely joyous, as if the incidental pain made the contest all the more worthwhile. He ran through the pack, kicking the ball high in the air, trying to avoid the feet of those who sought to trip him. No one was quite sure how the game had come into existence, or exactly what the rules were, but the boys played with battlefield intensity, as their fathers had years before. Pug ran onto the field and placed a foot before Rulf just as he was about to hit Tomas from behind. Rulf went down in a tangle of bodies, and Tomas broke free.. He ran toward the goal and, dropping the ball in front of himself, kicked it into a large overturned barrel, scoring for his side. While other boys yelled in celebration, Rulf leaped to his feet and pushed aside another boy to place himself directly in front of Pug. Glaring out from under thick brows, he spat at Pug, "Try that again and I'll break your legs, sand squint!" The sand squint was a bird of notoriously foul habits-not the least of which was leaving eggs in other birds' nests so that its offspring were raised by other birds. Pug was not about to let any insult of Rulf's pass unchallenged. With the frustrations of the last few months only a little below the surface, Pug was feeling particularly thin-skinned this day. With a leap he flew at Rulf's head, throwing his left arm around the stockier boy's neck. He drove his right fist into Rulf's face and could feel Rulf's nose squash under the first blow. Quickly both boys were rolling on the ground. Rulf's greater weight began to tell, and soon he sat astride Pug's chest, driving his fat fists into the smaller boy's face. Tomas stood by helpless, for as much as he wanted to aid his friend, ~ the boys' code of honor was as strict and inviolate as any noble's. Should he intervene on his friend's behalf, Pug would never live down the shame. Tomas jumped up

and down, urging Pug on, grimacing each time Pug was struck, as if he felt the blows himself.

Pug tried to squirm out from under the larger boy, causing many of his blows to slip by, striking dirt instead of Pug's face. Enough of them were hitting the mark, however, so that Pug soon began to feel a queer detachment from the whole procedure. He thought it strange that everybody sounded so far away, and that Rulf's blows seemed not to hurt. His vision was beginning to fill with red and yellow colors, when he felt the weight lifted from his chest. After a brief moment things came into focus, and Pug saw Prince Arutha standing over him, his hand firmly grasping Rulf's collar.

While not as powerful a figure as his brother or father, the Prince was still able to hold Rulf high enough so that the stableboy's toes barely touched the ground. The Prince smiled, but without humor. "I think the boy has had enough," he said quietly, eyes glaring. "Don't you agree?" His cold tone made it clear he wasn't asking for an opinion. Blood still ran down Rulf's face from Pug's initial blow as he choked out a sound the Prince took to mean agreement. Arutha let go of Rulf's collar, and the stableboy fell backward, to the laughter of the onlookers. The Prince reached down and helped Pug to his feet. Holding the wobbly boy steady, Arutha said, "I admire your courage, youngster, but we can't have the wits beaten out of the Duchy's finest young magician, can we?" His tone was only slightly mocking, and Pug was too numb to do more than stand and stare at the younger son of the Duke. The Prince gave him a slight smile and handed him over to Tomas, who had come up next to pug, a wet cloth in hand. Pug came out of his fog as Tomas scrubbed his face with the cloth, and felt even worse when he saw the Princess and Roland standing only a few feet away as Prince Arutha returned to their side. To take a beating before the girls of the keep was bad enough, to be punished by a lout like Rulf in front of the Princess was a catastrophe. Emitting a groan that had little to do with his physical state, Pug tried to look as much like someone else as he could. Tomas grabbed him roughly. "Try not to squirm around so much. You're not all that bad off. Most of this blood is Rulf's anyway. By tomorrow his nose will look like an angry red cabbage."

"So will my head."

"Nothing so bad. A black eye, perhaps two, with a swollen cheek thrown in to the bargain. On the whole, you did rather well, but next time you want to tangle with Rulf, wait until you've put on a little more size, will you?"

Pug watched as the Prince led his sister away from the site of battle.

Roland gave him a wide grin, and Pug wished himself dead.

PuG AND Tomas walked out of the kitchen, dinner plates in hand. It was a warm night, and they preferred the cooling ocean breeze to the heat of the scullery. They sat on the porch, and Pug moved his jaw from side to side, feeling it pop in and out. He experimented with a bite of lamb and put his plate to one side. Tomas watched him. "Can't eat?" Pug nodded. "Jaw hurts too much." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and chin on his fists. "I should have kept my temper. Then I would have done better." Tomas spoke from around a mouthful of food. "Master Fannon says a soldier must keep a cool head at all times or he'll lose it."



Pug sighed. "Kulgan said something like that. I have some drills I can do that make me relax. I should have used them." Tomas gulped a heroic portion of his meal. "Practicing in your room is one thing. Putting that sort of business into use while someone is insulting you to your face is quite another. I would have done the same thing, I suppose."

"But you would have won."

"Probably. Which is why Rulf would never have come at me." His manner showed he wasn't being boastful, merely stating things as they were. "Still, you did all right. Old cabbage nose will think twice before picking on you again, I'm sure, and that's what the whole thing is about, anyway." Pug said, "What do you mean?" Tomas put down his plate and belched. With a satisfied look at the sound of it, he said, "With bullies it's always the same: whether or not you can best them doesn't matter. What is important is whether or not you'll stand up to them. Rulf may be big, but he's a coward under all the bluster. He'll turn his attention to the younger boys now and push them around a bit. I don't think he'll want any part of you again. He doesn't like the price." Tomas gave Pug a broad and warm smile. "That first punch you gave him was a beaut. Right square on the beak." Pug felt a little better. Tomas eyed Pug's untouched dinner. "You going to eat that?" Pug looked at his plate. It was fully laden with hot lamb, greens, and potatoes. In spite of the rich smell, Pug felt no appetite. "No, you can have it." Tomas scooped up the platter and began shoving the food into his mouth. Pug smiled. Tomas had never been known to stint on food. Pug returned his gaze to the castle wall. "I felt like such a fool." Tomas stopped eating, with a handful of meat halfway to his mouth. He studied Pug for a moment. "You too?"

"Me too, what?" Tomas laughed. "you're embarrassed because the Princess saw Rulf give you a thrashing." Pug bridled.

"It wasn't a thrashing. I gave as well as I got."

Tomas whooped. "There! I knew it. It's the Princess." Pug sat back in resignation. "I suppose it is." Tomas said nothing, and Pug looked over at him. He was busy finishing off Pug's dinner. Finally Pug said, "And I suppose you don't like her?" Tomas shrugged. Between bites he said, "Our Lady Carline is pretty enough, but I know my place. I have my eye on someone else, anyway." Pug sat up. "Who?" he asked, his curiosity piqued. "I'm not saying," Tomas said with a sly smile. Pug laughed. "It's Neala, right?" Tomas's jaw dropped. "How did you know?" Pug tried to look mysterious. "We magicians have our ways." Tomas snorted. "Some magician. You're no more a magician than I am a Knight-Captain of the King's army. Tell me, how did you know?" Pug laughed. "It's no mystery. Every time you see her, you puff up in that tabard of yours and preen like a bantam rooster." Tomas looked troubled. "You don't think she's on to me, do you?" Pug smiled like a well-fed cat. "She's not on to you, I'm sure." He paused. "If she's blind, and all the other girls in the keep haven't pointed it out to her a hundred times already." A woebegone look crossed Tomas's face. "What must the girl think?" Pug said, "who knows what girls think? From everything I can tell, she probably likes it." Tomas looked thoughtfully at his plate. "Do you ever think about taking a wife?" Pug blinked like an owl caught in a bright light. "I . . . I never thought about it. I don't know if magicians marry. I don't think they do."

"Nor soldiers, mostly. But

Master Fannon says a soldier who thinks about his family is not thinking about his job." Tomas was silent for a minute. Pug said, "It doesn't seem to hamper Sergeant Gardan or some of the other soldiers." Tomas snorted, as if those exceptions merely proved his point. "I sometimes try to imagine what it would be like to have a family."

"You have a family, stupid. I'm the orphan here."

"I mean a wife, rock head." Tomas gave Pug his best "you're too stupid to live" look.

"And

children someday, not a mother and father." Pug shrugged. The conversation was turning to provinces that disturbed him. He never thought about these things, being less anxious to grow up than Tomas. He said, "I expect we'll get married and have children if it's what we're supposed to do." Tomas looked very seriously at Pug, so the younger boy didn't make light of the subject. "I've imagined a small room somewhere in the castle, and . . . I can't imagine who the girl would be." He chewed his food. "There's something wrong with it, I think."

"Wrong?"

"As if there's something else I'm not understanding . . . I don't know." Pug said, "Well, if you don't,

how am I supposed to?" Tomas suddenly changed the topic of conversation.

"We're friends, aren't we?" Pug was taken by surprise. "Of course we're friends. You're like a brother. Your parents have treated me like their own son. Why would you ask something like that?" Tomas put down his plate, troubled. "I don't know. It's just that sometimes I think this will all somehow change. You're going to be a magician, maybe travel over the world, seeing other magicians in faraway lands. I'm going to be a soldier, bound to follow my lord's orders. I'll probably never see more than a little part of the Kingdom, and that only as an escort in the Duke's personal guard, if I'm lucky."

Pug became alarmed. He had never seen Tomas so serious about anything. The older boy was always the first to laugh and seemed never to have a worry.

"I don't care what you think, Tomas," said Pug. "Nothing will change. We will be friends no matter what." Tomas smiled at that. "I hope you're right." He sat back, and the two boys watched the stars over the sea and the lights from the town, framed like a picture by the castle gate.

Pug tried to wash his face the next morning, but found the task too arduous to complete. His left eye was swollen completely shut, his right only half-open. Great bluish lumps decorated his visage, and his jaw popped when he moved it from side to side. Fantus lay on Pug's pallet, red eyes gleaming as the morning sun poured in through the tower window.

The door to the boy's room swung open, and Kulgan stepped through, his stout frame covered in a green robe. Pausing to regard the boy for a moment, he sat on the pallet and scratched the drake behind the eye ridges, bringing a pleased rumble from deep within Fantus's throat. "I see you didn't spend yesterday sitting about idly," he said. "I had a bit of trouble, sir."

"Well, fighting is the province of boys as well as grown men, but I trust that the other boy looks at least as bad. It would be a shame to have had

none of the pleasure of giving as well as receiving."

"You're making sport of me."

"Only a little, Pug. The truth is that in my own youth I had my share of scraps, but the time for boyish fighting is past. You must put your energies to better use."

"I know, Kulgan, but I

have been so frustrated lately that when that clod Rulf said what he did about my being an orphan, all the anger came boiling up out of me."

'-well,

knowing your own part in this is a good sign that you're becoming a man. Most boys would have tried to justify their actions, by shifting blame or by claiming some moral imperative to fight."

Pug pulled over the stool and sat down facing the magician. Kulgan took out his pipe and started to fill it. "Pug, I think in your case we may have been going about the matter of your education in the wrong way." Searching for a taper to light in the small fire that burned in a night pot and finding none, Kulgan's face clouded as he concentrated for a minute, then a small flame erupted from the index finger of his right hand. Applying it to the pipe, he soon had the room half-filled with great clouds of white smoke. The flame disappeared with a wave of his hand. "A handy skill, if you like the pipe."

"I would give anything to be able to do even that much,"

Pug said in disgust. "As I was saying, I think that we may have been going about this in the wrong way. Perhaps we should consider a different approach to your education."

"What do you mean?"

"Pug, the first magicians long ago had no teachers in the arts of magic. They evolved the skills that we've learned today. Some of the old skills, such as smelling the changes in the weather, or the ability to find water with a stick, go back to our earliest beginnings. I have been thinking that for a time I am going to leave you to your own devices. Study what you want in the books that I have. Keep up with your other work, learning the scribe's arts from Tully, but I will not trouble you with any lessons for a while. I will, of course, answer any question you have. But I think for the time being you need to sort yourself out." Crestfallen, Pug

asked, "Am I beyond help?" Kulgan smiled reassuringly. "Not in the least. There have been cases of magicians having slow starts before. Your apprenticeship is for nine more years, remember. Don't be put off by the failures of the last few months. "By the way, would you care to learn to ride?" Pug's mood did a complete turnabout, and he cried, "Oh, yes! May I?"

"The Duke has decided that he would like a boy to ride with the Princess from time to time. His sons have many duties now that they are grown, and he feels you would be a good choice for when they are too busy to accompany her." Pug's head was spinning. Not only was he to learn to ride, a skill limited to the nobility for the most part, but to be in the company of the Princess as well! "When do I start?"

"This very day. Morning chapel is almost done." Being Firstday, those inclined went to devotions either in the Keep's chapel, or in the small temple down in the town. The rest of the

day was given to light work, only that needed to put food on the Duke's table. The boys and girls might get an extra half day on Sixthday, but their elders rested only on Firstday. "Go to Horsemaster Algon, he has been instructed by the Duke and will begin your lessons now." Without a further word, Pug leaped up and sped for the stables.

4

## ASSAULT

Pug RODE IM SILENCE.

His horse ambled along the bluffs that overlooked the sea. The warm breeze carried the scent of flowers, and to the east the trees of the forest swayed slowly. The summer sun caused a heat shimmer over the ocean. Above the waves, gulls could be seen hanging in the air, then diving to the water as they sought food. Overhead, large white clouds drifted. Pug remembered this morning, as he watched the back of the Princess on her fine white palfrey. He had been kept waiting in the stables for nearly two hours before the Princess appeared with her father. The Duke had lectured Pug at length on his responsibility toward the lady of the castle. Pug had stood mute throughout as the Duke repeated all of Horsemaster Algon's instructions of the night before. The master of the stables had been instructing him for a week and judged him ready to ride with the Princess-if barely. Pug had followed her out of the gate, still marveling at his unexpected fortune. He was exuberant, in spite of having spent the night tossing and then skipping breakfast. Now his mood was changing from boyish adulation to outright irritation. The Princess refused to respond to any of his polite attempts at conversation, except to order him about. Her tone was imperious and rude, and she insisted on calling him "boy," ignoring several courteous reminders that his name was Pug. She acted little like the poised young woman of the court now, and resembled nothing as much as a spoiled, petulant child. He had felt awkward at first as he sat atop the old grey dray horse that had been judged sufficient for one of his skills. The mare had a calm nature and showed no inclination to move faster than absolutely necessary. Pug wore his bright red tunic, the one that Kulgan had given to him, but still looked poorly attired next to the Princess. She was dressed in a simple but exquisite yellow riding dress trimmed in black, and a matching hat. Even sitting sidesaddle, Carline looked like one born to ride, while Pug felt as if he should be walking behind his mare with a plow between. Pug's horse had an irritating tendency to want to stop every dozen feet to crop grass or nibble at shrubbery, ignoring Pug's frantic kicks to the side, while the Princess's excellently trained horse responded instantly to the slightest touch of her crop. She rode along in silence, ignoring the grunts of exertion from the boy behind, who attempted by force of will as much as horsemanship to keep his recalcitrant mount moving. Pug felt the first stirring of hunger, his dreams of romance surrendering to his normal, fifteen-year-old's appetite. As they rode, his thoughts turned more and more to the basket of lunch that hung from his saddle horn. After what seemed like an eternity to Pug, the

Princess turned to him. "Boy, what is your craft?" Startled by the question after the long silence, Pug stammered his reply. "I . . . I'm apprenticed to Master Kulgan."

She fixed him with a gaze that would have suited her had an insect been found crawling across a dinner plate. "Oh. You're that boy." Whatever brief spark of interest there had been went out, and she turned away from him. They rode awhile longer, then the Princess said, "Boy, we stop here." Pug pulled up his mare, and before he could reach the Princess's side, she was nimbly down not waiting for his hand as Master Algon had instructed him she would. She handed him the reins of her horse and walked to the edge of the cliffs. She stared out to sea for a minute, then, without looking at Pug, said, "Do you think I am beautiful?" Pug stood in silence, not knowing what to say. She turned and looked at him. "Well?" Pug said, "Yes, Your Highness."

"Very beautiful?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Very beautiful." The Princess seemed to consider this for a moment, then returned her attention to the vista below. "It is important for me to be beautiful, boy. Lady Marna says that I must be the most beautiful lady in the Kingdom, for I must find a powerful husband someday, and only the most beautiful ladies in the Kingdom can choose. The homely ones must take whoever will ask for them. She says that I will have many suitors, for Father is very important." She turned, and for a brief moment Pug thought he saw a look of apprehension pass over her lovely features. "Have you many friends, boy?" Pug shrugged. "Some, Your Highness." She studied him for a moment, then said, "That must be nice," absently brushing aside a wisp of hair that had come loose from under her broad-brimmed riding hat. Something in her seemed so wounded and alone that moment, that Pug found his heart in his throat again. Obviously his expression revealed something to the Princess, for suddenly her eyes narrowed and her mood shifted from thoughtful to regal. In her most commanding voice she announced, "We will have lunch now." Pug quickly staked the horses and unslung the basket. He placed it on the ground and opened it. Carline stepped over and said, "I will prepare the meal, boy. I'll not have clumsy hands overturning dishes and spilling wine." Pug took a step back as she knelt and began unpacking the lunch. Rich odors of cheese and bread assailed Pug's nostrils, and his mouth watered. The Princess looked up at him. "Walk the horses over the hill to the stream and water them. You may eat as we ride back. I'll call you when I have eaten." Suppressing a groan, Pug took the horses' reins and started walking. He kicked at some loose stones, emotions conflicting within him as he led the horses along. He knew he wasn't supposed to leave the girl, but he couldn't very well disobey her either. There was no one else in sight, and trouble was unlikely this far from the forest. Additionally he was glad to be away from Carline for a little while. He reached the stream and unsaddled the mounts, he brushed away the damp saddle and girth marks, then left their reins upon the ground. The palfrey was trained to ground-tie, and the draft horse showed no inclination to wander far. They cropped grass while Pug found a comfortable spot to sit. He considered the situation and found himself perplexed. Carline was still the loveliest girl he had ever seen, but her manner was quickly

taking the sheen off his fascination. For the moment his stomach was of larger concern than the girl of his dreams. He thought perhaps there was more to this love business than he had imagined. He amused himself for a while by speculation on that. When he grew bored, he went to look for stones in the water. He hadn't had much opportunity to practice with his sling of late, and now was a good time. He found several smooth stones and took out his sling. He practiced by picking out targets among the small trees some distance off, startling the birds in residence there. He hit several clusters of bitter berries, missing only one target out of six. Satisfied his aim was still as good as always, he tucked his sling in his belt. He found several more stones that looked especially promising and put them in his pouch. He judged the girl must be nearly through, and he started toward the horses to saddle them so that when she called, he'd be ready. As he reached the Princess's horse, a scream sounded from the other side of the hill. He dropped the Princess's saddle and raced to the crest and, when he deared the ridge, stopped in shock. The hair on his neck and arms stood on end. The Princess was running, and close in pursuit were a pair of trolls. Trolls usually didn't venture this far from the forest, and Pug was unprepared for the sight of them. They were humanlike, but short and broad, with long, thick arms that hung nearly to the ground. They ran on all fours as often as not, looking like some comic parody of an ape, their bodies covered by thick grey hide and their lips drawn back, revealing long fangs. The ugly creatures rarely troubled a group of humans, but they would attack a lone traveler from time to time. Pug hesitated for a moment, pulling his sling from his belt and loading a stone; then he charged down the hill, whirling his sling above his head. The creatures had nearly overtaken the Princess when he let fly with a stone. It caught the foremost troll in the side of the head, knocking it for a full somersault. The second stumbled into it, and both went down in a tangle. Pug stopped as they regained their feet, their attention diverted from Carlina to their attacker. They roared at Pug, then charged. Pug ran back up the hill. He knew that if he could reach the horses, he could outrun them, circle around for the girl, and be safely away. He looked over his shoulder and saw them coming-huge canine teeth bared, long foreclaws tearing up the ground. Downwind, he could smell their rank, rotting-meat odor. He cleared the top of the hill, his breath coming in ragged gasps. His heart skipped as he saw that the horses had wandered across the stream and were twenty yards farther away than before. Plunging down the hill, he hoped the difference would not prove fatal. He could hear the trolls behind him as he entered the stream at a full run. The water was shallow here, but still it slowed him down.

Splashing through the stream, he caught his foot on a stone and fell. He threw his arms forward and broke his fall with his hands, keeping his head above water. Shock ran up through his arms as he tried to regain his feet. He stumbled again and turned as the trolls approached the water's edge. They howled at the sight of their tormentor stumbling in the water and paused for a moment. Pug felt blind terror as he struggled with numb fingers to put a stone in his sling. He fumbled and dropped the sling, and the stream carried it away. Pug felt a scream building in his

throat. As the trolls entered the water, a flash of light exploded behind Pug's eyes. A searing pain ripped across his forehead as letters of grey seemed to appear in his mind. They were familiar to Pug, from a scroll that Kulgan had shown him several times. Without thinking, he mouthed the incantation, each word vanishing from his mind's eye as he spoke it. When he reached the last word, the pain stopped, and a loud roar sounded from before him. He opened his eyes and saw the two trolls writhing in the water, their eyes wide with agony as they thrashed about helplessly, screaming and groaning. Dragging himself out of the water, Pug watched while the creatures struggled. They were making choking and sputtering noises now as they flopped about. After a moment one shook and stopped moving, lying facedown in the water. The second took a few minutes longer to die, but like its companion, it also drowned, unable to keep its head above the shallow water. Feeling light-headed and weak, Pug recrossed the stream. His mind was numb, and everything seemed hazy and disjointed. He stopped after he had taken a few steps, remembering the horses. He looked about and could see nothing of the animals. They must have run off when they caught wind of the trolls and would be on the way to safe pasture. Pug resumed his walk to where the Princess had been. He topped the hillock and looked around. She was nowhere in sight, so he headed for the overturned basket of food. He was having trouble thinking, and he was ravenous. He knew he should be doing or thinking about something, but all he could sort out of the kaleidoscope of his thoughts was food. Dropping to his knees, he picked up a wedge of cheese and stuffed it in his mouth. A half-spilled bottle of wine lay nearby, and he washed the cheese down with it. The rich cheese and piquant white wine revived him, and he felt his mind clearing. He ripped a large piece of bread from a loaf and chewed on it while trying to put his thoughts in order. As Pug recalled events, one thing stood out. Somehow he had managed to cast a magic spell. What's more, he had done so without the aid of a book, scroll, or device. He was not sure, but that seemed somehow strange. His thoughts turned hazy again. More than anything he wanted to lie down and sleep, but as he chewed his food, a thought pushed through the crazy quilt of his impressions. The Princess! He jumped to his feet, and his head swam. Steadying himself, he grabbed up some bread and the wine and set off in the direction he had last seen her running. He pushed himself along, his feet scuffing as he tried to walk. After a few minutes he found his thinking improving and the exhaustion lifting. He started to call the Princess's name, then heard muted sobbing coming from a clump of bushes. Pushing his way through, he found Carline huddled behind the shrubs, her balled fists pulled up into her stomach. Her eyes were wide with terror, and her gown was soiled and torn. Startled when Pug stepped into view, she jumped to her feet and flew into his arms, burying her head in his chest. Great racking sobs shook her body as she clutched the fabric of his shirt. Standing with his arms still outstretched, wine and bread occupying his hands, Pug was totally confused over what to do. He awkwardly placed his arm around the terrified girl and said, "It's all right. They're gone. You're safe." She hung on to him for a moment, then, when her tears subsided, she stepped away. With a sniffle she said, "I thought they had killed you and were coming back for me." Pug found

this situation more perplexing than any he had ever known. Just when he had come through the most harrowing experience of his young life, he was faced with one that sent his mind reeling with a different sort of confusion. Without thinking, he held the Princess in his arms, and now he was suddenly aware of the contact, and her soft, warm appeal. A protective, masculine feeling welled up inside him, and he started to step toward her. As if sensing his mood change, Carline retreated. For all her courtly ways and education, she was still a girl of fifteen and was disturbed by the rush of emotions she had experienced when he had held her. She took refuge in the one thing she knew well, her role as Princess of the castle. Trying to sound commanding, she said, "I am glad to see you are unhurt, boy." Pug winced visibly at that. She struggled to regain her aristocratic bearing, but her red nose and tearstained face undermined her attempt. "Find my horse, and we shall return to the keep."

Pug felt as if his nerves were raw. Keeping tight control over his voice, he said, "I'm sorry, Your Highness, but the horses have run off. I'm afraid we'll have to walk."

Carline felt abused and mistreated. It was not

Pug's fault any of the afternoon's events had taken place, but her often-indulged temper seized on the handiest available object. "walk! I can't walk all the way to the keep," she snapped, looking at Pug as if he were supposed to do something about this matter at once and without question. Pug felt all the anger, confusion, hurt, and frustration of the day surge up within him. "

'Then you can bloody well sit here until they notice you're missing and send someone to fetch you." He was now shouting. "I figure that will be about two hours after sunset."

Carline stepped back, her face ashen, looking as if she'd been slapped. Her lower lip trembled, and she seemed on the verge of tears again. "I will not be spoken to in that manner, boy." Pug's eyes grew large, and he stepped toward her, gesturing with the wine bottle. "I nearly got myself killed trying to keep you alive," he shouted. "Do I hear one word of thanks? No! All I hear is a whining complaint that you can't walk back to the castle. We of the keep may be lowborn, but at least we have enough manners to thank someone when it's deserved." As he spoke, he could feel the anger flooding out of him. "You can stay here if you like, but I'm going. . . ." He suddenly realized that he was standing with the bottle raised high overhead, in a ridiculous pose. The Princess's eyes were on the loaf of bread, and he realized that he was holding it at his belt, thumb hooked in a loop, which only added to the awkward appearance. He sputtered for a moment, then felt his anger evaporate and lowered the bottle. The Princess looked at him, her large eyes peeking over her fists, which she had before her face. Pug started to say something, thinking she was afraid of him, when he saw she was laughing. It was a musical sound, warm and unmocking. "I'm sorry, Pug," she said, "but you look so silly standing there like that. You look like one of those awful statues they erect in Krondor, with bottle held high instead of a sword." Pug shook his head. "I'm the one who's sorry, Your Highness. I had no right to yell at you that way. Please forgive me." Her expression abruptly changed to one of concern. "No, Pug. You had



every right to say what you did. I really do owe you my life, and I've acted horribly." She stepped closer to him and placed a hand on his arm. "Thank you." Pug was overcome by the sight of her face. Any resolutions to rid himself of his boyhood fantasies about her were now carried away on the sea breeze. The marvelous fact of his using magic was replaced by more urgent and basic considerations. He started to reach for her, then the reality of her station intruded, and he presented the bottle to her. "Wine?" She laughed, sensing his sudden shift in thought. They were both wrung out and a little giddy from the ordeal, but she still held on to her wits and understood the effect she was having on him. With a nod she took the bottle and sipped. Recovering a shred of poise, Pug said, "We'd better hurry. We might make the keep by nightfall." She nodded, keeping her eyes upon him, and smiled. Pug was feeling uncomfortable under her gaze and turned toward the way to the keep. "Well, then. We'd best be off." She fell into step beside him. After a moment she asked, "May I have some bread too, Pug?"

Pug had run the distance between the bluffs and the keep many times before, but the Princess was unused to walking such distances, and her soft riding boots were ill suited to such an undertaking. When they came into view of the castle, she had one arm draped over Pug's shoulder and was limping badly. A shout went up from the gate tower, and guards came running toward them. After them came the Lady Marna, the girl's governess, her red dress pulled up before her as she sprinted toward the Princess. Although twice the size of court ladies—and a few of the guards as well she outdistanced them all. She was coming on like a she-bear whose cub was being attacked. Her great bosom heaved with the effort as she reached the slight girl and grasped her in a hug that threatened to engulf Carline completely. Soon the ladies of the court were gathered around the Princess, overwhelming her with questions. Before the din subsided, Lady Marna turned and fell on Pug like the sow bear she resembled. "How dare you allow the Princess to come to such a state! Limping in, dress all torn and dirty. I'll see you whipped from one end of the keep to the other. Before I have done with you, you'll wish you'd never seen the light of day." Backing away before the onslaught, Pug was overwhelmed by confusion, unable to get a word in. Sensing that somehow Pug was responsible for the Princess's condition, one of the guards stepped up and seized him by the arm. "Leave him alone!" Silence descended as Carline forced her way between the governess and Pug. Small fists struck at the guard as he let go of Pug and fell back with a look of astonishment on his face. "He saved my life! He almost got killed saving me." Tears were running down her face. "He's done nothing wrong. And I won't have any of you bullying him." The crowd closed in around them, regarding Pug with newfound respect. Hushed voices sounded from all sides, and one of the guards ran to carry the news to the castle. The Princess placed her arm around Pug's shoulder once more and started toward the gate. The crowd parted, and the two weary travelers could see the torches and lanterns being lit on the wall. By the time they had reached the courtyard gate, the Princess had consented to let two of her ladies help her, much to Pug's relief. He could not have believed that such a slight girl could become such a

burden. The Duke hurried out to her, having been told of Carline's return. He embraced his daughter, then started to speak with her. Pug lost sight of them as curious, questioning onlookers surrounded him. He tried to push his way toward the magician's tower, but the press of people held him back. "Is there no work to be done?" a voice roared. Heads turned to see Swordmaster Fannon, followed closely by Tomas. All the keep folk quickly retired, leaving Pug standing before Fannon, Tomas, and those of the Duke's court with rank enough to ignore Fannon's remark. Pug could see the Princess talking to her father, Lyam, Arutha, and Squire Roland. Fannon said, "What happened, boy?" Pug tried to speak, but stopped when he saw the Duke and his sons approaching. Kulgan came hurrying behind the Duke, having been alerted by the general commotion in the courtyard. All bowed to the Duke when he approached, and Pug saw Carline break free of Roland's solicitations and follow her father, to stand at Pug's side. Lady Marna threw a besieged look heavenward, and Roland followed the girl, an open expression of surprise upon his face. When the Princess took Pug's hand in her own, Roland's expression changed to one of black-humored jealousy. The Duke said, "My daughter has said some very remarkable things about you, boy. I would like to hear your account." Pug felt suddenly self-conscious and gently disengaged his hand from Carline's. He recounted the events of the day, with Carline enthusiastically adding embellishments. Between the two of them, the Duke gained a nearly accurate account of things. When Pug finished, Lord Borric asked, "How is it the trolls drowned in the stream, Pug?" Pug looked uncomfortable. "I cast a spell upon them, and they were unable to reach the shore," he said softly. He was still confused by this accomplishment and had not given much thought to it, as the Princess had pushed all other thoughts aside. He could see surprise registered on Kulgan's face. Pug began to say something, but was interrupted by the Duke's next remark. "Pug, I can't begin to repay the service you've done my family. But I shall find a suitable reward for your courage." In a burst of enthusiasm Carline threw her arms around Pug's neck, hugging him fiercely. Pug stood in embarrassment, looking frantically about, as if trying to communicate that this familiarity was none of his doing. Lady Marna looked ready to faint, and the Duke pointedly coughed, motioning with his head for his daughter to retire. As she left with the Lady Marna, Kulgan and Fannon simply let their amusement show, as did Lyam and Arutha. Roland shot Pug an angry, envious look, then turned and headed off toward his own quarters.

Lord Borric said to Kulgan, "Take this boy to his room. He looks exhausted. I'll order food sent to him. Have him come to the great hall after tomorrow's morning meal." He turned to Pug. "Again, I thank you." The Duke motioned for his sons to follow and walked away. Fannon gripped Tomas by the elbow, for the sandy-haired boy had started to speak with his friend. The old Swordmaster motioned with his head that the boy should come with him, leaving Pug in peace. Tomas nodded, though he was burning with a thousand questions. When they had all left, Kulgan placed his arm around the boy's shoulder. "Come, Pug. You're tired, and there is much to speak of."

Pug lay back on his pallet, the remains of his meal lying on a platter next to him. He couldn't remember ever having been this tired before. Kulgan paced back and forth across the room. "It's absolutely incredible." He waved a hand in the air, his red robe surging over his heavy frame like water flowing over a boulder. "You close your eyes, and the image of a scroll you saw weeks before appears. You incant the spell, as if you were holding the scroll in your hand before you, and the trolls fall. Absolutely incredible." Sitting down on the stool near the window, he continued. "Pug, nothing like this has ever been done before. Do you know what you've done?" Pug started from the edge of a warm, soft sleep and looked at the magician. "Only what I said I did, Kulgan." "Yes, but do you have any idea what it means?" "No." "Neither do I." The magician seemed to collapse inside as his excitement left, replaced by complete uncertainty. "I don't have the slightest idea what it all means. Magicians don't toss spells off the top of their heads. Clerics can, but they have a different focus and different magic. Do you remember what I taught you about focuses, Pug?" Pug winced, not being in the mood to recite a lesson, but forced himself to sit up. "Anyone who employs magic must have a focus for the power he uses. Priests have power to focus their magic through prayer, their incantations are a form of prayer. Magicians use their bodies, or devices, or books and scrolls." "Correct," said Kulgan, "but you have just violated that truism." He took out his long pipe and absently stuffed tabac into the bowl. "The spell you incanted cannot use the caster's body as a focus. It has been developed to inflict great pain upon another. It can be a very terrible weapon. But it can be cast only by reading from a scroll that it is written upon, at the time it's cast. Why is this?" Pug forced leaden eyelids open. "The scroll itself is magic."

"True. Some magic is intrinsic to the magician, such as taking on the shape of an animal or smelling weather. But casting spells outside the body, upon something else, needs an external focus. Trying to incant the spell you used from memory should have produced terrible pain in you, not the trolls, if it would have worked at all! That is why magicians developed scrolls, books, and other devices, to focus that sort of magic in a way that will not harm the caster. And until today, I would have sworn that no one alive could have made that spell work without the scroll in hand." Leaning against the windowsill, Kulgan puffed on his pipe for a moment, gazing out into space. "It's as if you have discovered a completely new form of magic," he said softly. Hearing no response, Kulgan looked down at the boy, who was deeply asleep. Shaking his head in wonder, the magician pulled a cover over the exhausted boy. He put out the lantern that hung on the wall and let himself out. As he walked up the stairs to his own room, he shook his head. "Absolutely incredible."

Pug waited as the Duke held court in the great hall. Everyone in the keep and town who could contrive a way to gain entrance to the audience was there. Richly dressed Craftmasters, merchants, and minor nobles were in attendance. They stood regarding the boy with expressions ranging from

wonder to disbelief. The rumor of his deed had spread through the town and had grown in the telling. Pug wore new clothing, which had been in his room when he awoke. In his newfound splendor he felt self-conscious and awkward. The tunic was a bright yellow affair of the costliest silk, and the hose were a soft pastel blue. Pug tried to wiggle his toes in the new boots, the first he had ever worn. Walking in them seemed strange and uncomfortable. At his side a jeweled dagger hung from a black leather belt with a golden buckle in the form of a gull in flight. Pug suspected the clothing had once belonged to one of the Duke's sons, put aside when outgrown, but still looking new and beautiful.

The Duke was finishing the morning's business: a request from one of the shipwrights for guards to accompany a lumber expedition to the great forest. Borric was dressed, as usual in black, but his sons and daughter wore their finest court regalia. Lyam was listening closely to the business before his father. Roland stood behind him, as was the custom. Arutha was in rare good humor, laughing behind an upraised hand at some quip Father Tully had just made. Carline sat quietly, her face set in a warm smile, looking directly at Pug, which was adding to his discomfort and Roland's irritation. The Duke gave his permission for a company of guards to accompany the craftsmen into the forest. The Craftmaster gave thanks and bowed, then returned to the crowd, leaving Pug alone before the Duke. The boy stepped forward as Kulgan had told him to do and bowed properly, albeit a little stiffly, before the Lord of Crydee. Borric smiled at the boy and motioned to Father Tully. The priest removed a document from the sleeve of his voluminous robe and handed it to a herald. The herald stepped forward and unrolled the scroll. In a loud voice he read: "To all within our demesne: Whereas the youth Pug, of the castle of Crydee, has shown exemplary courage in the act of risking life and limb in defense of the royal person of the Princess Carline, and; Whereas the youth, Pug of Crydee, is considered to hold us forever in his debt, It is my wish that he be known to all in the realm as our beloved and loyal servant, and it is furthermore wished that he be given a place in the court of Crydee, with the rank of Squire, with all rights and privileges pertaining thereunto. Furthermore let it be known that the title for the estate of Forest Deep is conferred upon him and his progeny as long as they shall live, to have and to hold, with servants and properties thereupon. Title to this estate shall be held by the crown until the day of his majority. Set this day by my hand and seal Borric conDoin, third Duke of Crydee, Prince of the Kingdom; Lord of

Crydee, Carse, and Tulan; Warden of the West; Knight-General of the King's Armies, heir presumptive to the throne of Rillanon." Pug felt his knees go slack but caught himself before he fell. The room erupted in cheers. People were pressing around him, offering their congratulations and slapping him on the back. He was a Squire and a landholder with franklins, a house, and stock. He was rich. Or at least he would be in three years when he reached his majority. While he was considered a man of the Kingdom at fourteen, grants of land and titles couldn't be conferred until he reached eighteen. The crowd backed away as the Duke approached, his family and Roland behind. Both Princes smiled at Pug, and the Princess seemed positively aglow. Roland gave Pug a rueful smile, as

if in disbelief.

"I'm honored, Your Grace," Pug stammered. "I don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing, Pug. It makes you seem wise when everyone is babbling. Come, and we'll have a talk." The Duke motioned for a chair to be placed near his own, as he put an arm around the boy's shoulders and walked him through the crowd. Sitting down, he said, "You may all leave us now. I would speak with the Squire." The crowd pressing around muttered in disappointment, but began to drift out of the hall. "Except you two," the Duke added, pointing toward Kulgan and Tully. Carline stood by her father's chair, a hesitant Roland at her side. "You as well, my child," said the Duke. Carline began to protest, but was cut off by her father's stern admonition: "You may pester him later, Carline." The two Princes stood at the door, obviously amused at her outrage, Roland tried to offer his arm to the Princess, but she pulled away and swept by her grinning brothers. Lyam clapped Roland on the shoulder as the embarrassed Squire joined them. Roland glared at Pug, who felt the anger like a blow.

When the doors clanged closed and the hall was empty, the Duke said, "Pay no heed to Roland, Pug. My daughter has him firmly under her spell, he counts himself in love with her and wishes someday to petition for her hand." With a lingering look at the closed door, he added almost absently, "But he'll have to show me he's more than the rakehell he's growing into now if he ever hopes for my consent." The Duke dismissed the topic with a wave of his hand. "Now, to other matters. Pug, I have an additional gift for you, but first I want to explain something to you. "My family is among the oldest in the Kingdom. I myself am descended from a King, for my grandfather, the first Duke of Crydee, was third son to the King. Being of royal blood, we are much concerned with matters of duty and honor. You are now both a member of my court and apprentice of Kulgan. In matters of duty you are responsible to him. In matters of honor you are responsible to me. This room is hung with the trophies and banners of our triumphs. Whether we have been resisting the Dark Brotherhood in their ceaseless effort to destroy us, or fighting off pirates, we have ever fought bravely. Ours is a proud heritage that has never known the stain of dishonor. No member of our court has ever brought shame to this hall, and I will expect the same of you." Pug nodded, tales of glory and honor remembered from his youth spinning in his mind.

The Duke smiled. "Now to the business of your other gift. Father Tully has a document that I asked him to draw up last night. I am going to ask him to keep it, until such time as he deems fit to give it to you. I will say no more on the subject, except that when he gives it to you, I hope you will remember this day and consider long what it says." "I will, Your Grace." Pug was sure the Duke was saying something very important, but with all the events of the last half hour, it did not register very well. "I will expect you for supper, Pug. As a member of the court, you will not be eating meals in the kitchen anymore." The Duke smiled at him. "We'll make a young gentleman out of you, boy. And someday when you travel to the King's city of Rillanon, no one will fault the manners of those who come from the court of Crydee."

## ShIPwrECK

THE brEEZE WAS COOL. The last days of summer had passed, and soon the rains of autumn would come. A few weeks later the first snows of winter would follow. Pug sat in his room, studying a book of ancient exercises designed to ready the mind for spell casting. He had fallen back into his old routine once the excitement of his elevation to the Duke's court had worn off. His marvelous feat with the trolls continued to be the object of speculation by Kulgan and Father Tully. Pug found he still couldn't do many of the things expected of an apprentice, but other feats were beginning to come to him. Certain scrolls were easier to use now, and once, in secret, he had tried to duplicate his feat. He had memorized a spell from a book, one designed to levitate

objects. He had felt the familiar blocks in his mind when he tried to incant it from memory. He had failed to move the object, a candleholder, but it trembled for a few seconds and he felt a brief sensation, as if he had touched the holder with a part of his mind. Satisfied that some sort of progress was being made, he lost much of his former gloom and renewed his studies with vigor. Kulgan still let him find his own pace. They had had many long

discussions on the nature of magic, but mostly Pug worked in solitude. Shouting came from the courtyard below. Pug walked to his window. Seeing a familiar figure, he leaned out and cried, "Ho! Tomas! What is afoot?" Tomas looked up. "Ho! Pug! A ship has foundered in the night. The wreck has beached beneath Sailor's Grief. Come and see." "I'll be right down." Pug ran to the door, pulling on a cloak, for while the day was clear, it would be cold near the water. Racing down the stairs, he cut through the kitchen, nearly knocking over Alfán, the pastry cook. As he bolted out the door, he heard the stout baker yell, "Squire or not, I'll box your ears if you don't watch where you're going, boy!" The kitchen staff had not changed their attitude toward the boy, whom they considered one of their own, beyond feeling proud of his achievement. Pug shouted back with laughter in his voice, "My apologies, Mastercook!" Alfán gave him a good-natured wave as Pug vanished through the outside door and around the corner to where Tomas was waiting. Tomas turned toward the gate as soon as he saw his friend. Pug grabbed his arm. "Wait. Has anyone from the court been told?" "I don't know. Word just came from the fishing village a moment ago," Tomas said impatiently. "Come on, or the villagers will pick the wreck clean." It was commonly held that salvage could be legally carried away before any of the Duke's court arrived. As a result, the villagers and townsfolk were less than timely in informing the authorities of such occurrences. There was also a risk of bloodshed, should the beached ship still be manned by sailors determined to keep their master's cargo intact so that they would get their fair sailing bonus. Violent confrontation, and even death, had been the result of such dispute. Only the presence of men-at-arms could guarantee no commoner would come to harm from lingering mariners. "Oh, no," said Pug. "If there is any trouble down there and the Duke finds out

I didn't tell someone else, I'll be in for it." "Look, Pug. Do you think with all these people rushing about, the Duke will be long in hearing of it?" Tomas ran his hand through his hair. "Someone is probably in the great hall right now, telling him the news. Master Fannon is away on patrol, and Kulgan won't be back awhile yet." Kulgan was due back later that day from his cottage in the forest, where he and Meecham had spent the last week. "It may be our only chance to see a shipwreck." A look of sudden inspiration came over his face. "Pug, I have it! You're a member of the court now. Come along, and when we get there, you declare for the Duke." A calculating expression crossed his face. "And if we find a rich bauble or two, who's

to know?" "I would know." Pug thought a moment.

"I can't properly declare for the Duke, then take something for myself . . . He fixed Tomas with a disapproving expression. ". . . or let one of his men-at-arms take some-thing either." As Tomas's face showed his embarrassment, Pug said, "But we can still see the wreck! Come on!" Pug was suddenly taken with the idea of using his new office, and if he could get there before too much was carried away or someone was hurt, the Duke would be pleased with him. "All right," he said, "I'll saddle a horse and we can ride down there before everything is stolen." Pug turned and ran for the stable. Tomas caught up with him as he opened the large wooden doors. "But, Pug, I have never been on a horse in my life. I don't know how." "It's simple," Pug said, taking a bridle and saddle from the tack room. He spied the large grey he had ridden the day he and the Princess had their adventure. "I'll ride and you sit behind me. just keep your arms around my waist, and you won't fall off." Tomas looked doubtful. "I'm to depend on you?" He shook his head. "After all, who has looked after you all these years?" Pug threw him a wicked smile. "Your mother. Now fetch a sword from the armory in case there's trouble. You may get to play soldier yet." Tomas looked pleased at the prospect and ran out the door. A few minutes later the large grey with the two boys mounted on her back lumbered out the main gate, heading down the road toward Sailor's Grief.

The surF was pounding as the boys came in sight of the wreckage. Only a few villagers were approaching the site, and they scattered as soon as a horse and rider appeared, for it could only be a noble from the court to declare the wreck's salvage for the Duke. By the time Pug reined in, no one was about. Pug said, "Come on. We've got a few minutes to look around before anyone else gets here." Dismounting, the boys left the mare to graze in a little stand of grass only fifty yards from the rocks. Running through the sand, the boys laughed, with Tomas raising the sword aloft, trying to sound fierce as he yelled old war cries learned from the sagas. Not that he had any illusions about his ability to use it, but it might make someone think twice about attacking them-at least long enough for castle guards to arrive. As they neared the wreck, Tomas whistled a low note. "This ship didn't just run on the rocks, Pug. It looks like it was driven by a storm." Pug said, "There certainly isn't much left, is there?" Tomas scratched behind his right ear. "No, just a section of the bow. I don't

understand. There wasn't any storm last night, just a strong wind. How could the ship be broken up so badly?" "I don't know." Suddenly something registered on Pug. "Look at the bow. See how it's painted." The bow rested on the rocks, held there until the tide rose. From the deck line down, the hull was painted a bright green, and it shone with reflected sunlight, as if it had been glazed over. Instead of a figurehead, intricate designs were painted in bright yellow, down to the waterline, which was a dull black. A large blue-and-white eye had been painted several feet behind the prow, and all the above-deck railing that they could see was painted white. Pug grabbed Tomas's arm. "Look!" He pointed to the water behind the prow, and Tomas could see a shattered white mast extending a few feet above the surging foam. Tomas took a step closer. "It's no Kingdom ship, for certain." He turned to Pug. "Maybe they were from Queg?" "No," answered Pug. "You've seen as many quegan ships as I have. This is nothing from Queg or the Free Cities. I don't think a ship like this has ever passed these waters before. Let's look around." Tomas seemed suddenly timid. "Careful, Pug. There is something

strange here, and I have an ill feeling. Someone may still be about." Both boys looked around for a minute, before Pug concluded, "I think not. whatever snapped that mast and drove the ship ashore with enough force to wreck it this badly must have killed any who tried to ride her in." Venturing closer, the boys found small articles lying about, tossed among the rocks by the waves. They saw broken crockery and boards, pieces of torn red sailcloth, and lengths of rope. Pug stopped and picked up a strange-looking dagger fashioned from some unfamiliar material. It was a dull grey and was lighter than steel, but still quite sharp. Tomas tried to pull himself to the railing, but couldn't find a proper footing on the slippery rocks. Pug moved along the hull until he found himself in danger of having his boots washed by the tide; they could board the hulk if they waded into the sea, but Pug was unwilling to ruin his good clothing. He walked back to where Tomas stood studying the wreck. Tomas pointed behind Pug. "If we climb up to that ledge, we could lower ourselves down to the deck."

Pug saw the ledge, a jutting single piece of stone that started twenty feet back on their left, extending upward and out to overhang the bow. It looked like an easy climb, and Pug agreed. They pulled themselves up and inched along the ledge, backs flat to the base of the bluffs. The path was narrow, but by stepping carefully, they ran little risk of falling. They reached a point above the hull, Tomas pointed. "Look. Bodies!" Lying on the deck were two men, both dressed in bright blue armor of unfamiliar design.

One had his head crushed by a fallen spar, but the other, lying facedown, didn't show any injuries, beyond his stillness. Strapped across that man's back was an alien-looking broadsword, with strange serrated edges. His head was covered by an equally alien-looking blue helmet, potlike, with an outward flaring edge on the sides and back. Tomas shouted over the sound of the surf, "I'm going to let myself down. After I get on the deck, hand me the sword, and then lower yourself so I can grab you."

Tomas handed Pug the sword, then turned around slowly. He knelt



with his face against the cliff wall. Sliding backward, he let himself down until he was almost hanging free. With a shove he dropped the remaining four feet, landing safely. Pug reversed the sword and handed it down to Tomas, then followed his friend's lead, and in a moment they both stood on the deck. The foredeck slanted alarmingly down toward the water, and they could feel the ship move beneath their feet. "The tide's rising," Tomas shouted. "It'll lift what's left of the ship and smash it on the rocks. Everything will be lost." "Look around," Pug shouted back. "Anything that looks worth saving we can try to throw up on the ledge." Tomas nodded, and the boys started to search the deck. Pug put as much space as he could between the bodies and himself when he passed them. All across the deck, debris created a confused spectacle for the eye. Trying to discern what might prove valuable and what might not was difficult. At the rear of the deck was a shattered rail, on either side of a ladder to what was left of the main deck below: about six feet of planking remaining above the water. Pug was sure that only a few feet more could be underwater, or else the ship would be higher on the rocks. The rear of the ship must have already been carried away on the tide. Pug lay down on the deck and hung his head over the edge. He saw a door to the right of the ladder. Yelling for Tomas to join him, he made his way carefully down the ladder. The lower deck was sagging, the undersupports having been caved in. He grasped the handrail of the ladder for support. A moment later Tomas stood beside him, stepped around Pug, and moved to the door. It hung half-open, and he squeezed through with Pug a step behind. The cabin was dark, for there was only a single port on the bulkhead next to the door. In the gloom they could see many rich-looking pieces of fabric and the shattered remnants of a table.

What looked like a cot or low bed lay upside down in a corner. Several small chests could be seen, with their contents spread around the room as if tossed about by some giant hand. Tomas tried to search through the mess, but nothing was recognizable as important or valuable. He found one small bowl of unusual design glazed with bright colored figures on the sides, and he put it inside his tunic. Pug stood quietly, for something in the cabin commanded his attention. A strange, urgent feeling had overtaken him as soon as he had stepped in. The wreck lurched, throwing Tomas off balance. He caught himself on a chest, dropping the sword. "The ship's lifting. We'd better go." Pug didn't answer, his attention focused on the strange sensations. Tomas grabbed his arm. "Come on. The ship'll break up in a minute." Pug shook his hand off. "A moment. There is something . . ." His voice trailed off. Abruptly he crossed the disordered room and pulled open a drawer in a latched chest. It was empty. He yanked open another, then a third. In it was the object of his search. He drew out a rolled parchment with a black ribbon and black seal on it and thrust it into his shirt. "Come on," he shouted as he passed Tomas. They raced up the ladder and scrambled over the deck. The tide had raised the ship high enough for them to pull themselves up to the ledge with ease, and they turned to sit. The ship was now floating on the tide, rocking forward and back, while the waves sent a wet spray into the boys' faces. They watched as the bow slid off the rocks, timbers breaking with a loud and deep tearing sound, like a

dying moan. The bow lifted high, and the boys were splashed by waves striking the cliffs below their ledge. Out to sea the hulk floated, slowly leaning over to its port side, until the outward surging tide came to a halt. Ponderously, it started back toward the rocks. Tomas grabbed at Pug's arm, signaling him to follow. They got up and made their way back to the beach. When they reached the place where the rock overhung the sand, they jumped down. ~ A loud grinding sound made them turn to see the hull driven onto the rocks. Timbers shattered, and separated with a shriek. The hull heaved to starboard, and debris started sliding off the deck into the sea. Suddenly Tomas reached over and caught Pug's arm. "Look." He pointed at the wreck sliding backward on the tide. Pug couldn't make out what he was pointing at. "What is it?"

"I thought for a moment there was only one body on deck." Pug looked at him. Tomas's face was set in an expression of worry. Abruptly it changed to anger. "Damn!" "What?" "When I fell in the cabin, I dropped the sword. Fannon will have my ears." A sound like an explosion of thunder marked the final destruction of the wreck as the tide smashed it against the cliff face. Now the shards of the once fine, if alien, ship would be swept out to sea, to drift back in along the coast for miles to the south over the next few days.

A low groan ending in a sharp cry made the boys turn. Standing

behind them was the missing man from the ship, the strange broad-sword held loosely in his left hand and dragging in the sand. His right arm was held tightly against his side, blood could be seen running from under his blue breastplate, and from under his helmet. He took a staggering step forward. His face was ashen, and his eyes wide with pain and confusion. He shouted something incomprehensible at the boys. They stepped back slowly, raising their hands to show they were unarmed. He took another step toward them, and his knees sagged. He staggered erect and closed his eyes for a moment. He was short and stocky, with powerfully muscled arms and legs. Below the breastplate he wore a short skirt of blue cloth. On his forearms were bracers, and on his legs, greaves that looked like leather, above thonged sandals. He put his hand to his face and shook his head. His eyes opened, and he regarded the boys again. Once more he spoke in his alien tongue. When the boys said nothing, he appeared to grow angry and yelled another series of strange words, from the tone seemingly questions. Pug gauged the distance necessary to run past the man, who blocked the narrow strip of beach. He decided it wasn't worth the risk of finding out if the man was in a condition to use that wicked-looking sword. As if sensing the boy's thoughts, the soldier staggered a few feet to his right, cutting off any escape. He closed his eyes again, and what little color there was in his face drained away. His gaze began to wander, and the sword slipped from limp fingers. Pug started to take a step toward him, for it was now obvious that he could do them no harm. As he neared the man, shouts sounded up the beach. Pug and Tomas saw Prince Arutha riding before a troop of horsemen. The wounded soldier turned his head painfully at the sound of approaching horses,

and his eyes widened. A look of pure horror crossed his face, and he tried to flee. He took three staggering steps toward the water and fell forward into the sand.

Pug stood near the door of the Duke's council chamber. Several feet away a concerned group sat at Duke Borric's round council table. Besides the Duke and his sons, Father Tully, Kulgan, who had returned only an hour before, Swordmaster Fannon, and Horsemaster Algon sat in assembly. The tone was serious, for the arrival of the alien ship was viewed as potentially dangerous to the Kingdom. Pug threw a quick glance at Tomas, standing on the opposite side of the door. Tomas had never been in the presence of nobility, other than serving in the dining hall and being in the Duke's council chamber was making him nervous. Master Fannon spoke, and Pug returned his attention to the table. "Reviewing what we know," said the old Swordmaster, "it is obvious that these people are completely alien to us." He picked up the bowl Tomas had taken from the ship. "This bowl is fashioned in a way un-known to our Masterpotter. At first he thought it was simply a fired and glazed clay, but upon closer inspection it proved otherwise. It is fashioned from some sort of hide, parchment-thin strips being wound around a mold-perhaps wood-then laminated with resins of some type. It is much stronger than anything we know." To demonstrate, he struck the bowl hard against the table. Instead of shattering, as a clay bowl would have, it made a dull sound. "Now, even more perplexing are these weapons and armor." He pointed to the blue breastplate, helmet, sword, and dagger. "They appear to be fashioned in a similar manner." He lifted the dagger and let it drop. It made the same dull sound as the bowl. "For all its lightness, it is nearly as strong as our best steel."

Borric nodded. "Tully, you've been around longer than any of us. Have you heard of any ship constructed like that?" "No." Tully absently stroked his beardless chin. "Not from the Bitter Sea, the Kingdom Sea, or even from Great Kesh have I heard of such a ship. I might send word to the Temple of Ishap in Krondor. They have records that go further back than any others. Perhaps they have some knowledge of these people." The Duke nodded. "Please do. Also we must send word to the elves and dwarves. They have abided here longer than we by ages, and we would do well to seek their wisdom."

Tully indicated agreement. "Queen Aglaranna might have knowledge of these people if they are travelers from across the Endless Sea. Perhaps they have visited these shores before." "Preposterous," snorted Horsemaster Algon. "There are no nations across the Endless Sea. Otherwise it wouldn't be endless." Kulgan took on an indulgent expression. "There are theories that other lands exist across the Endless Sea. It is only that we have no ships capable of making such a long journey." "Theories," was all Algon said. "Whoever these strangers are," said Arutha, "we had best make sure we can find out as much as possible about them." Algon and Lyam gave him a questioning look, while Kulgan and Tully looked on without expression. Borric and Fannon nodded as Arutha continued. "From the boys' description, the ship was obviously a war-ship. The heavy prow with bowsprit is designed for ramming, and the high foredeck is a perfect place for bowmen, as the low middle deck is suitable for boarding other

vessels when they have been grappled. I would imagine the rear deck was also high. If more of the hull had survived, I would guess we would have found rowers' benches as well."

"A war galley?" asked Algon. Fannon looked impatient. "Of course, you simpleton." There was a friendly rivalry between the two masters, which at times degenerated to some unfriendly bickering. "Take a look at our guest's weapon." He indicated the broadsword. "How would you like to ride at a determined man wielding that toy? He'd cut your horse right out from under you. That armor is light, and efficiently constructed for all its gaudy coloring. I would guess that he was infantry. As powerfully built as he is, he probably could run half a day and still fight." He stroked his mustache absently. "These people have some warriors among them." Algon nodded slowly. Arutha sat back in his chair, making a tent of his hands, fingertips flexing. "What I can't understand," said the Duke's younger son, "is why he tried to run. We had no weapons drawn and were not charging. There was no reason for him to run." Borric looked at the old priest. "Will we ever know?" Tully looked concerned, his brow furrowed. "He had a long piece of wood embedded in his right side, under the breastplate, as well as a bad blow to the head. That helmet saved his skull. He has a high fever and has lost a great deal of blood. He may not survive. I may have to resort to a mind contact, if he regains enough consciousness to establish it." Pug knew of the mind contact, Tully had explained it to him before. It was a method only a few clerics could employ, and it was extremely dangerous for both the subject and the caster. The old priest must feel a strong need to gain information from the injured man to risk it. Borric turned his attention to Kulgan. "What of the scroll the boys found?" Kulgan waved a hand absently. "I have given a preliminary, and brief, inspection. It has magical properties without a doubt. That is why Pug felt some compulsion to inspect the cabin and that chest, I think. Anyone as sensitive to magic as he is would feel it." He looked directly at the Duke. "I am, however, unwilling to break the seal until I have made a more involved study of it, to better determine its purpose. Breaking enchanted seals can be dangerous if not handled properly. If the seal was tampered with, the scroll might destroy itself, or worse, those trying to break it. It wouldn't be the first such trap I've seen for a scroll of great power." The Duke drummed his fingers on the table for a moment. "All right. We will adjourn this meeting. As soon as something new has been learned, either from the scroll or from the wounded man, we will recon-vene." He turned to Tully. "See how the man is, and if he should wake, use your arts to glean whatever you can." He stood, and the others rose also. "Lyam, send word to the Elf queen and the dwarves at Stone Mountain and the Grey Towers of what has happened. Ask for their counsel."

Pug opened the door. The Duke went through and the others followed. Pug and Tomas were the last to leave, and as they walked down the hall, Tomas leaned over toward Pug. "We really started something." Pug shook his head. "We were simply the first to find the man. If not us, then someone else."

Tomas looked relieved to be out of the chamber and the Duke's scrutiny. "If this turns out badly, I hope they remember that."

Kulgan went up the stairs to his tower room as Tully moved off toward his own quarters, where the wounded man was being tended by Tully's acolytes. The Duke and his sons turned through a door to their private quarters, leaving the boys alone in the hallway. Pug and Tomas cut through a storage room, and into the kitchen. Megar stood supervising the kitchen workers, several of whom waved greetings to the boys. When he saw his son and fosterling, he smiled and said, "Well, what have you two gotten yourselves into, now?" Megar was a loose-jointed man, with sandy hair and an open countenance. He resembled Tomas, as a rough sketch resembled a finished drawing. He was a fair-looking man of middle years, but lacked the fine features that set Tomas apart.

Grinning, Megar said, "Everyone is hushed up about that man in Tully's quarters, and messengers are dashing from here to there, one place to another. I haven't seen such a to-do since the Prince of Krondor visited seven years ago!" Tomas grabbed an apple from a platter and jumped up to sit on a table. Between bites he recounted to his father what had taken place. Pug leaned on the counter while listening. Tomas told the story with a minimum of embellishment. When he was done, Megar shook his head.

"Well, well. Aliens, is it? I hope they're not marauding pirates. We have had peaceful enough times lately. Ten years since the time the Brotherhood of the Dark Path"-he gestured spitting-"curse their murderous souls, stirred up that trouble with the goblins. Can't say as I'd welcome that sort of mess again, sending all those stores to the outlying villages. Having to cook based on what will spoil first and what will last longest. I couldn't make a decent meal for a month."

Pug smiled. Megar had the ability to take even the most difficult possibilities and break them down to basics: how much inconvenience they were likely to cause the scullery staff. Tomas jumped down from the counter. "I had best return to the soldiers' commons and wait for Master Fannon. I'll see you soon." He ran from the kitchen. Megar said, "Is it serious, Pug?" Pug shook his head. "I really can't say. I don't know. I know that Tully and Kulgan are worried, and the Duke thinks enough of the problem to want to talk to the elves and dwarves. It could be." Megar looked out the door that Tomas had used. "It would be a bad time for war and killing." Pug could see the poorly hidden worry in Megar's face and could think of nothing to say to a father of a son who had just become a soldier. Pug pushed himself away from the counter. "I'd better be off, as well, Megar." He waved good-bye to the others in the kitchen and walked out of the kitchen and into the courtyard. He had little temper for study, being alarmed by the serious tone of the meeting in the Duke's chambers. No one had come out and said as much, but it was obvious they were considering the possibility that the alien ship was the vanguard of an invasion fleet.

Pug wandered around to the side of the keep and climbed the three steps to the Princess's small flower garden. He sat on a stone bench, the hedges and rows of rosebushes masking most of the courtyard from sight. He could still see the top of the high walls, with the guards patrolling the parapets. He wondered if it was his imagination, or were the guards looking especially watchful today?

The sound of a delicate cough made him turn. Standing on the other side of the garden was Princess Carline, with Squire Roland and two of her younger ladies-in-waiting. The girls hid their smiles, for Pug was still something of a celebrity in the keep. Carline shooed them off, saying, "I would like to speak with Squire Pug in private." Roland hesitated, then bowed stiffly. Pug was irritated by the dark look Roland gave him as he left with the young ladies. The two young ladies looked over their shoulder at Pug and Carline, giggling, which seemed only to add to Roland's irritation. Pug stood as Carline approached and made an awkward bow. She said, in short tones, "Oh, sit down. I find that rubbish tiring and get all I need from Roland." Pug sat. The girl took her place next to him, and they were both silent for a moment. Finally she said, "I haven't seen you for more than a week. Have you been busy?" Pug felt uncomfortable, still confused by the girl and her mercurial moods. She had been only warm to him since the day, three weeks ago, when he had saved her from the trolls, stirring up a storm of gossip among the staff of the castle. She remained short-tempered with others, however, especially Squire Roland. "I have been busy with my studies." "Oh, pooh. You spend too much time in that awful tower." Pug didn't consider the tower room the least bit awful-except for being a bit drafty. It was his own, and he felt comfortable there. "We could go riding, Your Highness, if you would like." The girl smiled. "I would like that. But I'm afraid Lady Marna won't allow it." Pug was surprised. He thought that after the way he had protected the Princess, even the girl's surrogate mother would allow that he was proper company. "Why not?" Carline sighed. "She says that when you were a commoner, you would keep your place. Now that you are a courtier, she suspects you of having aspirations." A slight smile played across her lips. "Aspirations?" Pug said, not understanding. Carline said shyly, "She thinks that you have ambitions to rise to higher station. She thinks you seek to influence me in certain ways." Pug stared at Carline. Abruptly comprehension dawned on him, and he said, "Oh," then, "Oh.' Your Highness." He stood up. "I never would do such a thing. I mean, I would never think to . . . I mean . . ."

Carline abruptly stood and threw Pug an exasperated look. "Boys! You're all idiots." Lifting the hem of her long green gown, she stormed off. Pug sat down, more perplexed than before by the girl. It was almost as if . . . He let the thought trail away. The more it seemed possible that she could care for him, the more anxious the prospect made him. Carline was quite a bit more than the fairy-tale Princess he had imagined a short time back. With the stamp of one little foot, she could raise a storm in a saltcellar, one that could shake the keep. A girl of complex mind was the Princess, with a contradictory nature tossed into the bargain. Further musing was interrupted by Tomas, dashing by. Catching a glimpse of his friend, he leapt up the three steps and halted breathlessly before him. "The Duke wants us. The man from the ship has died."

THEY HASTILY ASSEMBLED in the Duke's council chamber, except Kulgan, who had not answered when a messenger knocked at his door. It was supposed he was too deeply engrossed in the problem of the magic scroll. Father Tully looked pale and drawn. Pug was shocked by his appearance. Only a little more than an hour had passed, yet the old cleric looked as if he

had spent several sleepless nights. His eyes were red-rimmed and deep-set in dark circles. His face was ashen, and a light sheen of perspiration showed across his brow. Borric poured the priest a goblet of wine from a decanter on a side-board and handed it to him. Tully hesitated, for he was an abstemious man, then drank deeply. The others resumed their former positions around the table. Borric looked at Tully and said, simply, "Well?" "The soldier from the beach regained consciousness for only a few minutes, a final rally before the end. During that time I had the opportunity to enter into a mind contact with him. I stayed with him through his last feverish dreams, trying to learn as much about him as I could. I nearly didn't remove the contact in time."

Pug paled. During the mind contact, the priest's mind and the subjects become as one. If Tully had not broken contact with the man when he died, the priest could have died or been rendered mad, for the two men shared feelings, fears, and sensations as well as thought. He now understood Tully's exhausted state: the old priest had spent a great deal of energy maintaining the link with an uncooperative subject and had been party to the dying man's pain and terror. Tully took another drink of wine, then continued. "If this man's dying dreams were not the product of fevered imaginings, then I fear his appearance heralds a grave situation." Tully took another sip of wine and pushed the goblet aside. "The man's name was Xomich. He was a simple soldier of a nation, Honshoni, in something called the Empire of Tsuranuanni." Borric said, "I have never heard of this nation, nor of that Empire." Tully nodded and said, "I would have been surprised if you had. That man's ship came from no sea of Midkemia." Pug and Tomas looked at each other, and Pug felt a chilling sensation, as, apparently, did Tomas, whose face had turned pale. Tully went on. "We can only speculate on how the feat was managed, but I am certain that this ship comes from another world, removed from our own in time and space." Before questions could be asked, he said, "Let me explain." "This man was sick with fever, and his mind wandered." Tully's face flickered with remembered pain.

"He was part of an honor guard for someone he thought of only as 'Great One.' There were conflicting images, and I can't be sure, but it seems that the journey they were on was considered strange, both for the presence of this Great One and for the nature of the mission. The only concrete thought I gained was that this Great One had no need to travel by ship. Beyond that, I have little but quick and disjointed impressions. There was a city he knew as Yankora, then a terrible storm, and a sudden blinding brilliance, which may have been lightning striking the ship, but I think not. There was a thought of his captain and comrades being washed overboard. Then a crash on the rocks." He paused for a moment. "I am not sure if those images are in order, for I think it likely that the crew was lost before the blinding light." "Why?" asked Borric. "I'm ahead of myself," said Tully. "First I'd like to explain why I think this man is from another world. "This Xomich grew to manhood in a land ruled by great armies. They are a warrior race, whose ships control the seas. But what seas? Never, to my knowledge, has there been mention of contact with these people. And there are other visions that are even more convincing.

Great cities, far larger than those in the heart of Kesh, the largest known to us. Armies on parade during high holiday, marching past a review stand; city garrisons larger than the King's Army of the West." Algon said, "Still, there is nothing to say they are not from"-he paused, as if the admission were difficult-"across the Endless Sea." That prospect seemed to trouble him less than the notion of some place not of this world. Tully looked irritated at the interruption. "There is more, much more. I followed him through his dreams, many of his homeland. He remembers creatures unlike any I have heard of or seen, things with six legs that pull wagons like oxen, and other creatures, some that look like insects or reptiles, but speak like men. His land was hot, and his memory of the sun was of one larger than ours and more green in color. This man was not of our world."

The last was said flatly, removing from all in the room any lingering doubts. Tully would never make a pronouncement like that unless he was certain. The room was silent as each person reflected on what had been said. The boys watched and shared the feeling. It was as if no one were willing to speak, as if to do so would seal the priest's information forever in fact, while to stay silent might let it pass like a bad dream. Borric stood and paced over to the window. It looked out upon a blank rear wall of the castle, but he stared as if seeking something there, some-thing that would provide an answer for the questions that spun in his mind. He turned quickly and said, "How did they get here, Tully?"

The priest shrugged. "Perhaps Kulkan can offer a theory as to the means. What I construct as being the most likely series of events is this: the ship foundered in the storm, the captain of the ship and most of its crew were lost. As a last resort this Great One, whoever he is, invoked a spell to remove the ship from the storm, or change the weather, or some other mighty feat. As a result, the ship was cast from its own world into this, appearing off the coast at Sailor's Grief. With the ship moving at great speed on its own world, it may have appeared here with the same movement, and with the westerly blowing strong, and little or no crew, the ship was driven straight onto the rocks. Or it simply may have appeared upon the rocks, smashed at the instant it came into being here."

Fannon shook his head. "From another world. How can that be possible?" The old priest raised his hands in a gesture of mystification. "One can only speculate. The Ishapians have old scrolls in their temples. Some are reputed to be copies of older works, which in turn are copies of still older scrolls. They claim the originals date back, in unbroken line, to the time of the Chaos Wars. Among them is mention of 'other planes' and 'other dimensions,' and of concepts lost to us. One thing is clear, however. They speak of lands and peoples unknown and suggest that once mankind traveled to other worlds, or to Midkemia from other worlds. These notions have been the center of religious debate for centuries, and no one could say with certainty what truth there was in any of them." He paused, then said, "Until now. If I had not seen what was in Xomich's mind, I would not have accepted such a theory to explain this day's occurrences. But now. '

Borric crossed to his chair to stand behind it, his hands gripping the side of the high back. "It seems impossible." "That the ship and man were here is fact, Father," said Lyam.



Arutha followed his brother's comment with another. "And we must decide what the chances are that this feat may be duplicated."

Borric said to Tully, "You were right when you said this may herald a grave situation. Should a great Empire be turning its attention toward Crydee and the Kingdom . . ." Tully shook his head. "Borric, have you so long been removed from my tutelage that you miss the point entirely?" He held up a bony hand as the Duke started to protest. "Forgive me, my lord. I am old and tired and forget my manners. But the truth is still the truth. A mighty nation they are, or rather an empire of nations, and if they have the means to reach us, it could prove dire, but most important is the possibility that this Great One is a magician or priest of high art. For if he is not one alone, if there are more within this Empire, and if they did indeed try to reach this world with magic, then grave times are truly in store for us." When everyone at the table still appeared not to comprehend what he was alluding to, Tully continued, like a patient teacher lecturing a group of promising but occasionally slow students. "The ship's appearance may be the product of chance and, if so, is only a cause for curiosity. But if it was by design that it came here, then we may be in peril, for to move a ship to another world is an order of magic beyond my imagining. If these people, the Tsurani as they call themselves, know we are here, and if they possess the means to reach us, then not only must we fear armies that rival Great Kesh at the height of its power, when its reach extended to even this remote corner of the world, we must also face magic far greater than any we have known." Borric nodded, for the conclusion was obvious, once pointed out. "We must have Kulgan's counsel on this at once." "One thing, Arutha," said Tully. The Prince looked up from his chair, for he had been lost in thought. "I know why Xomich tried to run from you and your men. He thought you were creatures he knew in his own world, centaurlike creatures, called ThUn, feared by the Tsurani." "Why would he think that?" asked Lyam, looking puzzled. "He had never seen a horse, or any creature remotely like it. I expect these people have none." The Duke sat down again. Drumming his fingers on the table, he said, "If what Father Tully says is true, then we must make some decisions, and quickly. If this is but an accident that has brought these people to our shores, then there may be little to fear. If, however, there is some design to their coming, then we should expect a serious threat. Here we are the fewest in number of all the Kingdom's garrisons, and it would be a hard thing should they come here in force." The others murmured agreement, and the Duke said, "We would do well to try to understand that what has been said here is still only speculation, though I am inclined to agree with Tully on most points. We should have Kulgan's thoughts upon the matter of these people." He turned to Pug. "Lad, see if your master is free to join us." Pug nodded and opened the door, then raced through the keep. He ran to the tower steps and took them two at a time. He raised his hand to knock and felt a strange sensation, as if he were near a lightning strike, causing the hair on his arms and scalp to stand up. A sudden sense of wrongness swept over him, and he pounded on the door. "Kulgan! Kulgan! Are you all right?" he shouted, but no answer was forth-coming. He tried the door

latch and found it locked. He placed his shoulder against the door and tried to force it, but it held fast. The -feeling of strangeness had passed, but fear rose in him at Kulgan's silence. He looked about for something to force the door and, finding nothing, ran back down the stairs. He hurried into the long hall. Here guards in Crydee livery stood at their post. he shouted at the two nearest, "you two, come with me. My master is in trouble." Without hesitation they followed the boy up the stairs, their boots pounding on the stone steps. When they reached the magician's door, Pug said, "Break it down!" They quickly put aside spear and shield and leaned their shoulders against the door. Once, twice, three times they heaved, and with a protesting groan the timbers cracked around the lock plate. One last shove and the door flew open. The guards stopped themselves from -falling through the door and stepped back, amazement and confusion on their faces. Pug shouldered between them and looked into the room. On the floor lay Kulgan, unconscious. His blue robes were disheveled, and one arm was thrown across his face, as if in protection. Two feet from him, where his study table should have stood, hung a shimmering void. Pug stared at the place in the air. A large sphere of grey that was not quite grey shimmered with traces of a broken spectrum. He could not see through it, but there was nothing solid there. Coming out of the grey space was a pair of human arms, reaching toward the magician. When they touched the material of his robe, they stopped and fingered the cloth. As if a decision had been made, they traveled over his body, until they identified Kulgan's arm. The hands took hold of him and tried to lift his arm into the void. Pug stood in horror, for whoever or whatever was on the other side of the void was trying to pull the stout magician up and through. Another pair of hands reached through and picked up the magician's arm next to where the first held him, and Kulgan was being pulled toward the void. Pug turned and grabbed one of the spears from against the wall where the shocked guards had placed them. Before either of the men-at-arms could act, he leveled it at the grey spot and threw.

The spear flew across the ten feet that separated them from Kulgan and disappeared into the void. A brief second after, the arms dropped Kulgan and withdrew. Suddenly the grey void blinked out of existence, with a clap of air rushing in to fill it. Pug ran to Kulgan's side and knelt by his master. The magician was breathing, but his face was white and beaded with sweat. His skin felt cold and clammy. Pug ran to Kulgan's sleeping pallet and pulled off a blanket. As he was covering the magician, he shouted at the guards, "Get Father Tully."

Puc AND ToMAs sat up that night, unable to sleep. Tully had tended to the magician, giving a favorable prognosis. Kulgan was in shock but would recover in a day or two. Duke Borric had questioned Pug and the guards on what they had witnessed, and now the castle was in an uproar. All the guards had been turned out, and patrols to the outlying areas of the Duchy had been doubled. The Duke still did not know what the connection between the appearance of the ship and the strange manifestation in the magician's quarters was, but he was taking no chances with the safety of his realm. All along the walls of the castle, torches burned, and guards had been sent to Longpoint lighthouse and the town below. Tomas sat

next to Pug on a bench in Princess Carline's garden, one of the few quiet places in the castle. Tomas looked thoughtfully at Pug. "I expect that these Tsurani people are coming." Pug ran a hand through his hair. "We don't know that." Tomas sounded tired. "I just have a feeling." Pug nodded. "We'll know tomorrow when Kulgan can tell us what happened." Tomas looked out toward the wall. "I've never seen it so strange around here. Not even when the Dark Brotherhood and the goblins attacked back when we were little, remember?" Pug nodded, silent for a moment, then said, "We knew what we were facing then. The dark elves have been attacking castles on and off as far back as anyone can remember. And goblins . . . well, they're goblins." They sat in silence for a long time; then the sound of boots on the pavement announced someone coming. Swordmaster Fannon, in chain mail and tabard, halted before them. "What? Up so late? You should both be abed."

The old fighter turned to survey the castle walls. "There are many who find themselves unable to sleep this night." He turned his attention back to the boys. "Tomas, a soldier needs to learn the knack of taking sleep whenever he can find it, for there are many long days when there is none. And you, Squire Pug, should be asleep as well. Now, why don't you try to rest yourselves?" The boys nodded, bade the Swordmaster good night, and left. The grey-haired commander of the Duke's guard watched them go and stood quietly in the little garden for a time, alone with his own disquieting thoughts.

Pug WAS AWAKENED by the sound of footsteps passing his door. He quickly pulled on trousers and tunic and hurried up the steps to Kulgan's room. Passing the hastily replaced door, he found the Duke and Father Tully standing over Kulgan's sleeping pallet. Pug heard his master's voice, sounding feeble, as he complained about being kept abed. "I tell you, I'm fine," Kulgan insisted. "Just let me walk about a bit, and I'll be back to normal in no time." Tully, still sounding weary, said, "Back on your back, you mean. You sustained a nasty jolt, Kulgan. Whatever it was that knocked you unconscious packed no small wallop. You were lucky, it could have been much worse." Kulgan noticed Pug, who stood quietly at the door, not wishing to disturb anyone. "Ha, Pug," he said, his voice regaining some of its usual volume. "Come in, come in. I understand I have you to thank for not taking an unexpected journey with unknown companions." Pug smiled, for Kulgan seemed his old jovial self, in spite of his wan appearance. "I really did nothing, sir. I just felt that something was not right, and acted." "Acted quickly and well," said the Duke with a smile. "The boy is again responsible for the well-being of one of my household. At this rate I may have to grant him the title Defender of the Ducal Household." Pug smiled, pleased with the Duke's praise. Borric turned to the magician. "Well, seeing as you are full of fire, I think we should have a talk about yesterday. Are you well enough?" The question brought an irritated look from Kulgan. "Of course I'm well enough. That's what I've been trying to tell you for the last ten minutes." Kulgan started to rise from the bed, but as dizziness overtook him, Tully put a restraining hand on his shoulder, guiding him back to the large pile of pillows he had been resting on. "You can talk here quite well enough, thank you. Now, stay in bed."

Kulgan made no protest. He shortly felt better and said, "Fine, but hand me my pipe, will you, please?" Pug fetched Kulgan's pipe and pouch of tabac and, as the magician tamped down the bowl, a long burning taper from the fire pot. Kulgan lit his pipe and, when it was burning to his satisfaction, lay back with a contented look on his face. "Now," he said, "where do we begin?" The Duke quickly filled him in on what Tully had revealed, with the priest adding a few details the Duke overlooked. When they were done, Kulgan nodded. "Your assumption about the origin of these people is likely. I suspected the possibility when I saw the artifacts brought from the ship, and the events in this room yesterday bear me out." He paused for a moment, organizing his thoughts. "The scroll was a personal letter from a magician of these people, the Tsurani, to his wife, but it was also more. The seal was magically endowed to force the reader to incant a spell contained at the end of the message. It is a remarkable spell enabling anyone, whether or not they can normally read, to read the scroll." The Duke said, "This is a strange thing." Tully said, "It's astonishing." "The concepts involved are completely new to me," agreed Kulgan. "Anyway, I had neutralized that spell so I could read the letter without fear of magical traps, common to private messages written by magicians. The language was of course strange, and I employed a spell from another scroll to translate it. Even understanding the language through that spell, I don't fully understand everything discussed. "A magician named Fanatha was traveling by ship to a city on his homeworld. Several days out to sea, they were struck by a severe storm. The ship lost its mast, and many of the crew were washed overboard.

The magician took a brief time to pen the scroll-it was written in a hasty hand-and cast the spells upon it. It seems this man could have left the ship at any time and returned to his home or some other place of safety, but was enjoined from doing so by his concern for the ship and its cargo. I am not clear on this point, but the tone of the letter suggested that risking his life for the others on the ship was somehow unusual. Another puzzling thing was a mention of his duty to someone he called the 'Warlord.' I may be reaching for straws, but the tone leads me to think this was a matter of honor or a promise, not some personal duty. In any event he penned the note, sealed it, and was then going to undertake to move the ship magically." Tully shook his head in disbelief. "Incredible."

"And as we understand magic, impossible," Kulgan added excitedly. Pug noticed that the magician's professional interest was not shared by the Duke, who looked openly troubled. The boy remembered Tully's comments on what magic of that magnitude meant if these people were to invade the Kingdom. The magician continued, "These people possess powers about which we can only speculate. The magician was very clear on a number of points-his ability to compress so many ideas into so short a message shows an unusually organized mind. "He took great pains to reassure his wife he would do everything in his power to return. He referred to opening a rift to the 'new world,' because-and I don't fully understand this-a bridge was already established, and some device he possessed lacked . . . some capacity or an-other to move the ship on his own world. From all indications, it was a most desperate gamble. He placed a

second spell on the scroll-and this is what caught me in the end. I thought by neutralizing the first spell I had countered the second also, but I was in error. The second spell was designed to activate as soon as someone had finished reading the scroll aloud, another unheard-of piece of magical art. The spell caused another of these rifts to open, so the message would be transported to a place called 'the Assembly' and from there to his wife. I was nearly caught in the rift with the message." Pug stepped forward. Without thinking, he blurted, "Then those

hands might have been his friends trying to find him." Kulgan looked at his apprentice and nodded. "A possibility. In any event, we can derive much from this episode. These Tsurani have the ability to control magic that we can only hint at in our speculation. We know a little about the occurrences of rifts, and nothing of their nature." The Duke looked surprised. "Please explain." Kulgan drew deep on his pipe, then said, "Magic, by its nature, is unstable. Occasionally a spell will become warped-why, we don't know to such a degree, it . . . tears at the very fabric of the world. For a brief time a rift occurs, and a passage is formed, going . . . somewhere. Little else is known about such occurrences, except that they involve tremendous releases of energy." Tully said, "There are theories, but no one understands why every so often a spell, or magic device, suddenly explodes in this fashion and why this instability in reality is created. There have been several occurrences like this, but we have only secondhand observations to go on. Those who witnessed the creation of these rifts died or vanished." Kulgan picked up the narrative again. "It's considered axiomatic that they were destroyed along with anything within several feet of the rift."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "By rights I should have been killed when that rift appeared in my study." The Duke interrupted. "From your description, these rifts, as you call them, are dangerous." Kulgan nodded. "Unpredictable, as well. They are one of the most uncontrollable forces ever discovered. If these people know how to manufacture them and control them as well, to act as a gate between worlds, and can pass through them safely, then they have arts of the most powerful sort."

Tully said, "We've suspected something of the nature of rifts before, but this is the first time we've had anything remotely like hard evidence."

Kulgan said, "Bah! Strange people and unknown objects have appeared suddenly from time to time over the years, Tully. This would certainly explain where they came from." Tully appeared unwilling to concede the point. "Theory only, Kulgan, not proof. The people have all been dead, and the devices . . . no one understands the two or three that were not burned and twisted beyond recognition." Kulgan smiled.

"Really? What about the man who appeared twenty years ago in Salador?" To the Duke he said, "This man spoke no language known and was dressed in the strangest fashion." Tully looked down his nose at Kulgan. "He was also hopelessly mad and never could speak a word that could be understood. The temples invested much time on him-" Borric paled. "Gods! A nation of warriors, with armies many times the size of our own, who have access to our world at will. Let us hope they have not turned their eyes toward the Kingdom." Kulgan nodded and blew a puff of smoke. "As yet, we have not heard of any other appearances of

these people, and we may not have to fear them, but I have a feeling . . .  
." He left the thought unfinished for a moment. He turned a little to one side, easing some minor discomfort, then said, "It may be nothing, but a reference to a bridge in the message troubles me. It smacks of a permanent way between the worlds already in existence. I hope I'm wrong." The sound of feet pounding up the stairs made them turn. A guard hurried in and came to attention before the Duke, handing him a small paper. The Duke dismissed the man and opened the folded paper. He read it quickly, then handed it to Tully. "I sent fast riders to the elves and the dwarves, with pigeons to carry replies. The Elf queen sends word that she is already riding to Crydee and will be here in two days' time." Tully shook his head. "As long as I have lived, I have never heard of the Lady Aglaranna leaving Elvandar. This sets my bones cold."

Kulgan said, "Things must be approaching a serious turn for her to come here. I hope I am wrong, but I think that we are not the only ones to have news of these Tsurani." Silence descended over the room, and Pug was struck by a feeling of hopelessness. He shook it off, but its echoes followed him for days.

6

## ELFCOUNSEL

Pug LEARNED OUT THE WINDOW.

Despite the driving rain that had come in early morning, the court-yard was in an uproar. Besides the necessary preparations for any important visit, there was the added novelty of these visitors being elves. Even the infrequent elf messenger from Queen Aglaranna was the object of much curiosity when one appeared at the castle, for rarely did the elves venture south of the river Crydee. The elves lived apart from the society of men, and their ways were thought strange and magical. They had lived in these lands long before the coming of men to the West, and there was an unvoiced agreement that, in spite of any claims made by the Kingdom, they were a free people. A cough caused Pug to turn and see Kulgan sitting over a large tome. The magician indicated with a glance that the boy should return to his studies. Pug closed the window shutters and sat on his pallet. Kulgan said, "There will be ample time for you to gawk at elves, boy, in a few hours. Then there will be little time for studies. You must learn to make the best use of what time you have." Fantus scrambled over to place his head in the boy's lap. Pug scratched absently behind an eye ridge as he picked up a book and started to read. Kulgan had given Pug the task of formulating shared qualities of spells as described by different magicians, in the hope it would deepen his understanding of the nature of magic. Kulgan was of the opinion that Pug's spells with the trolls had been the result of the tremendous stress of the moment. He hoped the study of other magicians' research might help the boy break through the barriers that held him back in his studies. The book work also proved fascinating

to Pug, and his reading had improved greatly. Pug glanced at his master, who was reading while puffing great clouds of smoke from his long pipe. Kulgan showed no signs of the weakness of the day before and had insisted the boy use these hours to study, rather than sit idly by waiting for the arrival of the Elf Queen and her court. A few minutes later, Pug's eyes began to sting from the pungent smoke, and he turned back to the window and pushed open the shutters. "Kulgan?" "Yes, Pug?" "It would be much nicer working with you if we could somehow keep the fire going for warmth but move the smoke outside." Between the -smoking fire pot and the magician's pipe, the room was thick with a blue-white haze. The magician laughed loudly. "Right you are." He closed his eyes for a moment, his hands flew in a furious motion, and he softly mouthed a series of incantations. Soon he was holding a large sphere of white and grey smoke, which he took to the window and tossed outside, leaving the room fresh and clear. Pug shook his head, laughing. "Thank you, Kulgan. But I had a more mundane solution in mind. What do you think of making a chimney for the fire pot?" "Not possible, Pug," Kulgan said, sitting down. He pointed to the wall. "If one had been installed when the tower was built, fine. But to try to remove the stones from the tower, from here past my room, and up to the roof would be difficult, not to mention costly." "I wasn't thinking of a chimney in the wall, Kulgan. You know how the forge in the smithy has a stone hood taking the heat and smoke through the roof?" The magician nodded. "Well, if I could have a metal one fashioned by the smith, and a metal chimney coming from the hood to carry the smoke away, it would work the same way, wouldn't it?" Kulgan pondered this for a moment. "I don't see why it wouldn't. But where would you put this chimney?"

"There." Pug pointed to two stones above and to the left of the window. They had been ill fitted when the tower was built, and now there was a large crack between them that allowed the wind to come howling into the room. "This stone could be taken out," he said, indicating the leftmost one. "I checked it and it's loose. The chimney could come from above the fire pot, bend here"-he pointed to a spot in the air above the pot and level with the stone-"and come out here. If we covered the space around it, it would keep the wind out." Kulgan looked impressed.

"It's a novel idea, Pug. It might work. I'll speak to the smith in the morning and get his opinion on the matter. I wonder that no one thought of it before." Feeling pleased with himself for having thought of the chimney, Pug resumed his studies. He reread a passage that had caught his eye before, puzzling over an ambiguity. Finally he looked up at the magician and said, "Kulgan." "Yes, Pug?" he answered, looking up from his book. "Here it is again. Magician Lewton uses the same cantrip here as Marsus did, to baffle the effects of the spell upon the caster, directing it to an external target." Placing the large tome down so as not to lose his place, he picked up another. "But here Dorcas writes that the use of this cantrip blunts the spell, increasing the chance that it will not work. How can there be so much disagreement over the nature of this single construction?" Kulgan narrowed his gaze a moment as he regarded his student. Then he sat back, taking a long pull on his pipe, sending forth a cloud of blue smoke. "It shows what I've

said before, lad. Despite any vanity we magicians might feel about our craft, there's really very little order or science involved. Magic is a collection of folk arts and skills passed along from master to apprentice since the beginning of time. Trial and error, trial and error is the way. There has never been an attempt to create a system for magic, with laws and rules and axioms that are well understood and widely accepted." He looked thoughtfully at Pug. "Each of us is like a carpenter, making a table, but each of us choosing different woods, different types of saws, some using pegs and dowel, others using nails, another dovetailing joints, some staining, others not . . . in the end there's a table, but the means for making it are not the same in each case.

"What we have here is most likely an insight about the limits of each of these venerable sages you study, rather than any sort of prescription for magic. For Lewton and Marsus, the cantrip aided the construction of the spell; for Dorcas, it hindered." "I understand your example, Kulgan, but I'll never understand how these magicians all could do the same thing, but in so many different ways. I understand that each of them wanted to achieve his end and found a different means, but there is something missing in the manner they did it." Kulgan looked intrigued. "What is missing, Pug?"

The boy looked thoughtful. "I . . . I don't know. It's as if I expect to find something that will tell me, 'This is the way it must be done, the only way,' or something like that. Does that make any sense?"

Kulgan nodded. "I think I know you well enough to understand. You have a very well-ordered mind, Pug. You understand logic far better than most, even those much older than yourself. You see things as a system, rather than as a haphazard collection of events. Perhaps that is part of your trouble." Pug's expression showed his interest in what the magician was saying. Kulgan continued. "Much of what I am trying to teach is based on a system of logic, cause and effect, but much is not. It is like trying to teach someone to play the lute. You can show them the fingering of the strings, but that knowledge alone will not make a great troubadour. It is the art, not the scholarship, that troubles you." "I think I understand, Kulgan." He sounded dispirited. -Kulgan stood up. "Don't dwell on it; you are still young, and I have hope for you yet." His tone was light, and Pug felt the humor in it. "Then I am not a complete loss?" he said with a smile. "Indeed not." Kulgan looked thoughtfully at his pupil. "In fact, I have the feeling that someday you may use that logical mind of yours for the betterment of magic." Pug was a little startled. He did not think of himself as one to accomplish great things. Shouts came through the window, and Pug hurried to look out. A

troop of guards was running toward the front gate. Pug turned to Kulgan. "The elves must be coming! The guard is out." Kulgan said, "Very well. We are done with study for this day. There will be no holding you until you get a look at the elves. Run along." Pug raced out the door and down the stairs. He took them two at a time, jumping to the bottom of the tower landing over the last four and hitting the floor at a full run. He dashed through the kitchen and out the door. As he rounded the keep to the front courtyard, he found Tomas standing atop a hay wagon. Pug



climbed up next to him, to be better able to see the arrival over the heads of the curious keep folk gathered around. Tomas said, "I thought you weren't coming, thought you'd be locked away with your books all day." Pug said, "I wouldn't miss this. Elves~!" Tomas playfully dug his elbow into Pug's side. "Haven't you had your fill of excitement for this week?" Pug threw him a black look. "If you're so indifferent, why are you standing in the rain on this wagon?"

Tomas didn't answer. Instead he pointed. "Look!" Pug turned to see the guard company snap to attention as riders in green cloaks entered through the gate. They rode to the main doors of the keep, where the Duke waited. Pug and Tomas watched in awe, for they rode the most perfect white horses the boys had ever seen, using no saddle or bridle. The horses seemed untouched by wetness, and their coats glowed faintly; whether by some magic, or a trick of the grey afternoon light, Pug couldn't tell. The leader rode on an especially grand animal, full seventeen hands in height, with a long flowing mane and a tail like a plume. The riders reared the mounts in salute, and an audible intake of breath could be heard from those in the crowd. "Elf steeds," said Tomas, in hushed tones. The horses were the legendary mounts of the elves. Martin Longbow had once told the boys they lived in hidden, deep glades near Elvandar. It was said they possessed intelligence and a magic nature, and no human could sit their backs. It was also said that only one with royal elvish blood could command them to carry riders. Grooms rushed forward to take the horses, but a musical voice said, "There is no need." It came from the first rider, the one mounted on the greatest steed. She jumped nimbly down, without aid, landing lightly on her feet, and threw back her hood, revealing a mane of thick reddish hair.

Even in the gloom of the afternoon rain it appeared to be shot through with golden highlights. She was tall, nearly a match for Borric. She mounted the steps as the Duke came forward to meet her. Borric held out his hands and took hers in greeting. "Welcome, my lady; you do me and my house a great honor." The Elf Queen said, "You are most gracious, Lord Borric." Her voice was rich and surprisingly clear, able to carry over the crowd so that all in the courtyard could hear. Pug felt Tomas's hand clutching his shoulder. He turned to see a rapt expression on Tomas's face. "She's beautiful," said the taller boy. Pug returned his attention to the welcome. He was forced to agree that the Queen of the elves was indeed beautiful, if not in entirely human terms. Her eyes were large and a pale blue, nearly luminous in the gloom. Her face was finely chiseled, with high cheekbones and a strong but not masculine jaw. Her smile was full, and her teeth shone white between almost-red lips. She wore a simple circlet of gold around her brow, which held back her hair,

revealing the lobeless, upswept ears that were the hallmark of her race. The others in her company dismounted, all dressed in rich clothing. Each tunic was bright with contrasting leggings below. One wore a tunic of deep russet, another pale yellow with a surcoat of bright green. Some wore purple sashes, and others crimson hose. Despite the bright colors, these were elegant and finely made garments, with nothing loud or gaudy about them. There were eleven riders with the Queen, all similar in appearance, tall, youthful, and lithe in movement. The Queen turned from

the Duke and said something in her musical language. The elf steeds reared in salute, then ran through the gate, past the surprised onlookers. The Duke ushered his guests inside, and soon the crowd drifted away. Tomas and Pug sat quietly in the rain. Tomas said, "If I live to be a hundred, I don't think that I'll ever see her like." Pug was surprised, for his friend rarely showed such feelings. He had a brief impulse to chide Tomas over his boyish infatuation, but something about his companion's expression made that seem inappropriate. "Come on," he said, "we're getting drenched." Tomas followed Pug from the wagon. Pug said, "You had better change into some dry clothing, and see if you can borrow a dry tabard." Tomas said, "Why?" With an evil grin, Pug said, "Oh? Didn't I tell you? The Duke wants you to dine with the court. He wants you to tell the Elf queen what you saw on the ship." Tomas looked as if he were going to break down and run. "Me? Dine in the great hall?" His face went white. "Talk? To the Queen?"

Pug laughed with glee. "It's easy. You open your mouth and words come out." Tomas swung a roundhouse at Pug, who ducked under the blow, grabbing his friend from behind when he spun completely around. Pug had strength in his arms even if he lacked Tomas's size, and he easily picked his larger friend off the ground. Tomas struggled, and soon they were laughing uncontrollably. "Pug, put me down." "Not until you calm down." "I'm all right." Pug put him down. "What brought that on?" "Your smug manner, and not telling me until the last minute."

"All right. So I'm sorry I waited to tell you. Now what's the rest of it?" Tomas looked uncomfortable, more than was reasonable from the

rain. "I don't know how to eat with quality folk. I'm afraid I'll do something stupid." "It's easy. Just watch me and do what I do. Hold the fork in your left hand and cut with the knife. Don't drink from the bowls of water; they're to wash with, and use them a lot, because your hands will get greasy from the rib bones. And make sure you toss the bones over your shoulder to the dogs, and not on the floor in front of the Duke's table.

And don't wipe your mouth on your sleeves, use the tablecloth, that's what it's for." They walked toward the soldiers' commons, with Pug giving his friend instruction on the finer points of court manners. Tomas was impressed at the wealth of Pug's knowledge.

ToMAS VACILLATED between looking sick and pained. Each time someone regarded him, he felt as if he had been found guilty of the most grievous breach of etiquette and looked sick. Whenever his gaze wandered to the head table and he caught sight of the Elf Queen, his stomach tied up in knots and he looked pained. Pug had arranged for Tomas to sit next to him at one of the more removed tables from the Duke's. Pug's usual place was at Lord Borric's table, next to the Princess. He was glad for this chance to be away from her, for she still showed displeasure with him. Usually she chatted with him about the thousand little bits of gossip the ladies of the court found so interesting, but last night she had pointedly ignored him, lavishing all her attention on a surprised and obviously

pleased Roland. Pug found his own reaction puzzling, relief mixed with a large dose of irritation. While he felt relieved to be free of her wrath, he found Roland's fawning upon her a bothersome itch he couldn't scratch.

Pug had been troubled by Roland's hostility toward him of late, poorly hidden behind stiff manners. He had never been as close to Roland as Tomas had, but they had never before had cause to be angry with one another. Roland had always been one of the crowd of boys Pug's age. He had never hidden behind his rank when he had cause to be at odds with the common boys, always standing ready to settle the matter in whatever way proved necessary. And already being an experienced fighter when he arrived in Crydee, his differences soon were settled peacefully as often as not. Now there was this dark tension between Pug and Roland, and Pug found himself wishing he was Tomas's equal in fighting; Tomas was the only boy Roland was unable to best with fists, their one encounter ending quickly with Roland receiving a sound thumping. For as certain as the sun was rising in the morning, Pug knew a confrontation with the hotheaded young Squire was quickly approaching. He dreaded it, but knew once it came, he'd feel relief. Pug glanced at Tomas, finding his friend lost in his own discomfort. Pug returned his attention to Carline. He felt overwhelmed by the Princess, but her allure was tempered by a strange discomfort he felt when-ever she was near. As beautiful as he found her-her black locks and blue eyes igniting some very uncomfortable flames of imagination-the images were always somehow hollow, colorless at heart, lacking the amber-and-rose glow such daydreams had possessed when Carline had been a distant, unapproachable, and unknown figure. Observing her closely for even as short a time as he had recently made such idealized musing impossible. She was proving herself to be just too complicated to fit into simple daydreams. On the whole he found the question of the Princess troublesome, but seeing her with Roland made him forget his internal conflicts over her, as a less intellectual, more basic emotion came to the fore. He was becoming jealous. Pug sighed, shaking his head as he thought about his own misery at this moment, ignoring Tomas's. At least, thought Pug, I'm not alone. To Roland's obvious discomfort, Carline was deeply involved at the moment in conversation with Prince Calin of Elvandar, son of Aglaranna. The Prince seemed to be the same age as Arutha, or Lyam, but then so did his mother, who appeared to be in her early twenties. All the elves, except the Queen's seniormost adviser, Tathar, were quite young looking, and Tathar looked no older than the Duke. When the meal was over, most of the Duke's court retired. The Duke rose and offered his arm to Aglaranna and led those who had been ordered to attend them to his council chamber.

For the third time in two days, the boys found themselves in the Duke's council chamber. Pug was more relaxed about being there than before, thanks in part to the large meal, but Tomas seemed more disturbed than ever. If the taller boy had spent the hour before dinner staring at the Elf queen, in these close quarters he seemed to be looking everywhere but in her direction. Pug thought Aglaranna noticed Tomas's behavior and

smiled slightly, but he couldn't be sure.

The two elves who came with the Queen, Calin and Tathar, went at once to the side table that had the bowl and the artifacts taken from the Tsurani soldier. They examined them closely, fascinated by every detail. The Duke called the meeting to order, and the two elves came to chairs on either side of the Queen. Pug and Tomas stood by the door as usual. The Duke said, "We have told you what has occurred as well as we know, and now you have seen proof with your own eyes. If you think it would be helpful, the boys can recount the events on the ship." The queen inclined her head, but it was Tathar who spoke. "I would like to hear the story firsthand, Your Grace." Borric motioned for the boys to approach. They stepped forward, and Tathar said, "Which of you found this outworlder?" Tomas threw Pug a look that indicated the shorter boy should do the talking. Pug said, "We both did, sir," not knowing the proper address for the elf. Tathar seemed content with the general honorific. Pug recounted the events of that day, leaving out nothing he could remember.

When he had done, Tathar asked a series of questions, each jogging Pug's memory, bringing out small details he had forgotten. When he was done, Pug stepped back, and Tathar repeated the process with Tomas. Tomas began haltingly, obviously discomfited, and the Elf queen bestowed a reassuring smile on him. That only served to make him more unsettled, and he was soon dismissed. Tathar's questions provided more details about the ship, small things forgotten by the boys: fire buckets filled with sand tossed about the deck, empty spear-racks, substantiating Arutha's surmise that it had been, indeed, a warship. Tathar leaned back. "We have never heard of such a ship. It is in many ways like other ships, but not in all ways. We are convinced." As if by silent signal, Calin spoke. "Since the death of my Father-King, I serve as warleader of Elvandar. It is my duty to supervise the scouts and patrols that guard our glades. For some time we have been aware that there were strange occurrences in the great forest, south of the river Crydee. Several times our runners have found tracks made by men, in isolated parts of the forest. They have been found as near as the borders of Elvandar, and as far as the North Pass near Stone Mountain. "Our scouts have tried for weeks to find these men, but only tracks could be seen. There were none of the usual things that would be expected of a scouting or raiding party. These people were taking great care to disguise their presence. Had they not passed so close to Elvandar, they might have remained undetected, but no one may intrude near our home and go unnoticed. "Several days ago, one of our scouts sighted a band of strangers passing the river, near the edge of our forests heading in the direction of the North Pass. He followed for a half day's march, then lost them." Fannon raised his eyebrows. "An elven tracker lost them?" Calin inclined his head slightly. "Not by his lack of skill. They simply entered a thick glade and never appeared on the other side. He followed their tracks up to the point where they vanished." Lyam said, "I think we know now where they went." He looked uncommonly somber, resembling his father more than usual. Calin continued. "Four days before your message arrived, I led a patrol that sighted a band near the place of last sighting. They were short and stocky men, without beards. Some were fair and others dark.

There were ten of them, and they moved through the forest with little ease, the slightest sound put them on guard. But with all their caution, they still had no idea they were being tracked. "They all wore armor of bright colors, reds and blues, some green, others yellow, save one in black robes. They carried swords like the one on the table and others without the serration, round shields, and strange bows, short and curved in an odd doubled-back way." Algon sat forward. "They're recurved bows, like the ones used by Keshian dog-soldiers." Calin spread his hands. "Kesh has long been gone from these lands, and when we knew the Empire, they used simple bows of yew or ash." Algon interrupted in excited tones. "They have a way, secret to them, of fashioning such bows from wood and animal horn. They are small, but possess great power, though not as much as the longbow. Their range is surprisingly-" Borric cleared his throat pointedly, being unwilling to let the Horse-master indulge himself in his preoccupation with weaponry. "If His Highness will please continue?" Algon sat back, blushing furiously, and Calin said, "I tracked them for two days. They stopped and made cold camp at night and took great care not to leave signs of their passing. All food scraps and body wastes were gathered together in a sack and carried by one of their band. They moved carefully, but were easy for us to follow. "When they came to the edge of the forest, near the mouth of North Pass, they made marks upon a parchment as they had several times during their trek. Then the one in black activated some strange device, and they vanished." There was a stir from the Duke's company. Kulgan especially looked disturbed. Calin paused. "The thing that was most strange, however, was their language, for their speech was unlike any we know. They spoke in hushed tones, but we could hear them, and their words were without meaning." The Queen then spoke. "Hearing this, I became alarmed, for these outworlders are clearly mapping the West, ranging freely through the great forest, the hills of Stone Mountain, and now the coasts of the Kingdom. Even as we prepared to send you word, the reports of these outworlders became more frequent. Several more bands were seen in the area of the North Pass." Arutha sat forward, resting his arms on the table. "If they cross the North pass, they will discover the way to Yabon, and the Free Cities. The snows will have started to fall in the mountains, and they may discover we are effectively isolated from aid during the winter." For a moment alarm flickered on the Duke's face, betraying his stoic demeanor. He regained his composure and said, "There is still the South Pass, and they may not have mapped that far. If they were in that area, the dwarves would most likely have seen signs of them, as the villages of the Grey Towers are more widely scattered than those of Stone Mountain." "Lord Borric," said Aglaranna, "I would never have ventured from Elvandar if I had not thought the situation critical. From what you have told us of the outworld Empire, if they are as powerful as you say, then I fear for all the free peoples of the West. While the elves have little love for the Kingdom as such, we respect those of the Crydee, for you have ever been honorable men and have never sought to extend your realm into our lands. We would ally with you should these outworlders come for conquest." Borric sat quietly for a moment. "I thank the Lady of Elvandar for the aid of the elven folk should war come. We are also in your debt for your counsel, for now we can act. Had we not known of these happenings in the

great forests, we would likely have given the aliens more time for whatever trouble they are preparing." He paused again, as if considering his next words. "And I am convinced that these Tsurani plan us ill. Scouting an alien and strange land I could see, trying to determine the nature and temper of the people who live there, but extensive mapping by warriors can only be a prelude to invasion."

Kulgan sounded fatigued as he said, "They most likely will come with a mighty host." Tully shook his head. "Perhaps not." All eyes turned to him as he said, "I am not so certain. Much of what I read in Xomich's mind was confused, but there is something about this Empire of Tsuranuanni that makes it unlike any nation we know of, there is something very alien about their sense of duty and alliances. I can't tell you how I know, but I suspect they may choose to test us first, with but a small part of their might. It's as if their attentions are elsewhere, and we're an afterthought." He shook his head in admitted confusion. "I have this sense, nothing more." The Duke sat upright, a commanding tone coming into his voice.

"We will act. I will send messages to Duke Brucal of Yabon, and again to Stone Mountain and the Grey Towers." Aglaranna said, "It would be good to hear what the dwarven folk know."

Borric said, "I had hoped for word by now, but our messengers have not returned, nor have the pigeons they carry." Lyam said, "Hawks, perhaps. The pigeons are not always reliable, or perhaps the messengers never reached the dwarves." Borric turned to Calin. "It has been forty years since the siege of Carse, and we have had little traffic with the dwarves since. Who commands the dwarven clans now?" The Elf Prince said, "As then. Stone Mountain is under the banner of Harthorn, of Hogar's line, at village Delmoria. The Grey Towers rally to the banner of Dolgan, of Tholin's line, at village Caldara."

"Both are known to me, though I was but a boy when they raised the Dark Brothers' siege at Carse," said Borric.

"They will prove fierce allies if trouble comes."

Arutha said, "What of the Free Cities, and the Prince in Krondor?"

Borric sat back. "I must think on that, for there are problems in the East, or so I have word. I will give thought to the matter this night." He stood. "I thank you all for this counsel. Return to your quarters and avail yourselves of rest and refreshments. I will ask you to consider plans for dealing with the invaders, should they come, and we will meet again tomorrow." As the Elf queen rose, he offered her his arm, then escorted her through the doors that Tomas and Pug held open. The boys were the last to exit. Fannon took Tomas in tow, leading him to the soldiers' commons, while Kulgan stood outside the hall with Tully and the two elfen advisers. The magician turned to his apprentice. "Pug, Prince Calin expressed an interest in your small library of magic books. Would you please show them to him?" Pug said he would and led the Prince up the stairs to his door and opened it for him. Calin stepped through, and Pug followed. Fantus was asleep and woke with a start. He threw the elf a distrustful look. Calin slowly crossed over to the drake and spoke a few soft words in a language that Pug didn't understand. Fantus lost his nervousness and stretched forth his neck to allow the Prince to scratch

his head. After a moment the drake looked expectantly to Pug. Pug said, "Yes, dinner is over. The kitchen will be full of scraps." Fantus moved to the window with a wolfish grin and used his snout to push it open. With a snap of his wings he was out, gliding toward the kitchen. Pug offered Calin a stool, but the Prince said, "Thank you, but your chairs and stools are of little comfort to my kind. I will just sit on the floor, with your leave. You have a most unusual pet, Squire Pug." He gave Pug a small smile. Pug was a little uncomfortable hosting the Elf Prince in his poor room, but the elf's manner was such that the boy started to relax. "Fantus is less a pet than a permanent guest. He has a mind of his own. It is not unusual for him to disappear for weeks at a time, now and again, but mostly he stays here. He must eat outside the kitchen now that Meecham has gone." Calin inquired who Meecham was. Pug explained, adding, "Kulgan

has sent him over the mountains to Bordon, with some of the Duke's guards, before the North Pass is snowed in. He didn't say why he was going, Highness." Calin looked at one of the boy's books. "I prefer to be called Calin, Pug." Pug nodded, pleased. "Calin, what do you think the Duke has in mind?"

The elf gave him an enigmatic smile. "The Duke will reveal his own plans, I think. My guess is that Meecham is preparing the way should the Duke choose to journey east. You will most probably know on the morrow." He held up the book he had glanced at. "Did you find this interesting?" Pug leaned over and read the title. "Dorcas's Treatise on the Animation of Objects? Yes, though it seemed a little unclear."

"A fair judgment. Dorcas was an unclear man, or at least I found him so., Pug started.

"But Dorcas died thirty years ago." Calin smiled broadly, showing even white teeth. His pale eyes shone in the lantern light. "Then you know little of elven lore?"

"Little," Pug agreed. "You are the first elf I have ever spoken with, though I may have seen another elf once, when I was very little. I'm not sure." Calin tossed aside the book. "I know only what Martin Longbow has told me, that you can somehow speak with animals, and some spirits. That you live in Elvandar and the surrounding elven forests, and that you stay among your own kind mostly." The elf laughed, a soft, melodic sound. "Nearly all true. Knowing friend Longbow, I wager some of the tales were colorful, for while he is not a deceiving man, he has an elf's humor." Pug's expression showed he did not understand. "We live a very long time by your standards. We learn to appreciate the humor in the world, often finding amusement in places where men find little. Or you can call it simply a different way of looking at life. Martin has learned this from us, I think." Pug nodded. "Mocking eyes."

Calin raised an eyebrow in question. Pug explained, "Many people here find Martin difficult to be with. Different, somehow. I once heard a soldier say he had mocking eyes." Calin sighed. "Life has been difficult for Martin. He was left on his own at an early age. The Monks of Silban are good, kindly men, but ill equipped to raise a boy. Martin lived in the woods like a wild thing when he could flee his tutors. I found him

one day, fighting with two of our children—we are not very much different from men when very young. Over the years he has grown to be one of the few humans who is free to come to Elvandar at will. He is a valued friend. But I think he bears a special burden of loneliness, not being fully in the world of elves nor of men, but partially in both." Pug saw Martin in a new light and resolved to attempt to know the huntmaster better. Returning to the original topic, he said, "Is what he said true?" Calin nodded. "In some respects. We can speak to animals only as men do, in tones to make them easy, though we are better at it than most humans, for we read the moods of wild things more readily. Martin has some of this knack. We do not, however, speak with spirits. There are creatures we know whom humans consider spirits, Dryads, sprites, pixies—but they are natural beings who live near our magic." Pug's interest was piqued. "Your magic?"

"Ours is a magic that is part of our being, strongest in Elvandar. It is a heritage ages old, allowing us to live at peace within our forests. There we work as others do, hunting, tending our gardens, celebrating our joys, teaching our young. Time passes slowly in Elvandar, for it is an ageless place. That is why I can remember speaking with Dorcas, for in spite of my youthful appearance, I am over a hundred years old."

"A hundred . . ."

Pug shook his head. "Poor Tomas, he was distressed to hear you were the Queen's son. Now he will be desolate." Calin inclined his head, a half-smile playing across his face. "The lad who was with us in the council hall?"

Pug nodded. Calin said, "It is not the first time my Mother-queen has had such an effect upon a human, though older men can mask the effect with more ease."

"You don't mind?" asked Pug,

feeling protective toward his friend. "No, Pug, of course not. All in Elvandar love the Queen, and it is acknowledged her beauty is unsurpassed. I find it not surprising your friend is smitten. Since my Father-King passed, more than one bold noble of your race has come to press his suit for Aglaranna's hand. Now her mourning is at an end, and she may take another should she wish. That it would be one of your race is unlikely, for while a few such marriages have been made, they are very rare, and tend to be sad things at the end for our kind. She will live many more human life spans, the gods willing." Calin looked around the room, then added, "It is likely our friend Tomas will outgrow his feelings for the great lady of the elves. Much as your Princess will change her feelings toward you, I would think." Pug felt embarrassed. He had been curious as to what Carline and the Elf Prince had spoken about during dinner, but had been uncomfortable asking. "I noticed you spoke with her at great length."

"I had expected to meet a hero of seven feet in height, with lightning dancing around his shoulders. It seems you slew a score of trolls with a cast of your hand."

Pug blushed. "It was only two, and mostly by accident."

Calin's eyebrows shot up. "Even two is an accomplishment. I had thought the girl guilty of a flight of fancy. I would like to hear the story."



Pug told him what had happened. When he was done, Calin said, "It is an unusual tale, Pug. I know little of human magic, but I do know enough to think that what you did was as strange as Kulgan said. Elf magic is far different from human, but we understand ours better than you understand your own. Never have I heard of such an occurrence, but I can share this with you. Occasionally, at times of great need, an inner call can be made, bringing forth powers that lay dormant, deep within." Pug said, "I have thought as much, though it would be nice to understand a little better what happened."

"That may 'come in time." Pug looked at his guest and sighed deeply. "I wish I could understand Carline, as well." Calin shrugged and smiled. "Who can understand another's mind? I think for some time to come you will be the object of her attention. Then, it may be, another will distract her, perhaps young Squire Roland. He seems held in thrall by her."

Pug snorted. "Roland! That . . . bother."

Calin smiled appreciatively. "Then you are fond of the Princess?"

Pug looked upward, as if seeking guidance from some higher source.

"I do like her," he admitted with a heavy sigh. "But I don't know if I care for her that special way. Sometimes I think I do-especially when I see Roland fawning over her-but other times I don't. She makes it very hard for me to think clearly, and I always seem to say the wrong things to her."

"Unlike Squire Roland," prompted Calin.

Pug nodded. "He's court born and bred. He knows all the right things to say." Pug leaned back on his elbows and sighed wistfully. "I guess I'm just bothered by him out of envy as much as anything. He makes me feel like an ill-mannered clod with great lumps of stone for hands and tree stumps for feet."

Calin nodded understandingly. "I don't count myself an expert in all the ways of your people, Pug, but I've spent enough time with humans to know that you choose how you feel; Roland makes you feel clumsy only because you let him.

"I would hazard a guess young Roland might feel much the same way when your positions are reversed. The faults we see in others never seem as dreadful as those we see in ourselves. Roland might envy your direct speech and honest manner.

"In any event, what you or Roland do will have little effect on the Princess so long as she's determined to have her own way. She has romanticized you in much the same manner your friend has our Queen.

Short of you becoming a hopeless boor, she will not be shaken from this attitude until she is ready. I think she has you in mind as her future consort."

Pug gaped for a moment, then said, "Consort?"

Calin smiled. "The young are often overly concerned with matters to be settled in later years. I suspect her determination in the matter is as much a result of your reluctance as from a true appreciation of your worth. She, like many children, simply wants what she can't have." In a friendly tone he added, "Time will decide the issue."

Pug leaned forward, a worried expression on his face. "Oh, my, I have made a hash of things. Half the keep boys think themselves in love with the Princess. If they only knew how terrifying the real thing can be." He closed his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut a moment. "My head aches. I thought she and Roland . . ."

Calin said, "He may be but a tool to provoke your interest. Sadly, that seems to have resulted in bad feelings between you."

Pug nodded slowly. "I think so. Roland is a good enough sort on the whole; we've been friends for the most part. But since I was elevated in rank, he's been openly hostile. I try to ignore it, but it gets under my skin after a while. Maybe I should try to talk to him."

"That would prove wise, I think. But don't be surprised if he is not receptive to your words. He is most certainly caught up in her spell."

Pug was getting a headache from the topic, and the mention of spells made him ask, "Would you tell me more about elven magic?"

"Our magic is ancient. It is part of what we are and in what we create.

Elven boots can make even a human silent when walking, and elven bows are better able to strike the mark, for that is the nature of our magic. It is vested in ourselves, our forests, our creations. It can sometimes be managed, subtly by those who fully understand it . . . Spellweavers, such as Tathar. But this is not easily done, for our magic resists manipulation. It is more like air than anything, always surrounding us, yet unseen. But like air, which can be felt when the wind blows, it has substance. Our forests are called enchanted by men, for so long have we dwelled there, our magic has created the mystery of Elvandar. All who dwell there are at peace. No one may enter Elvandar uninvited, save by mighty arts, and even the distant boundaries of the elven forests cause unease in those who enter with evil intent. It has not always been so, in ages past we shared our lot with others, the *moredhel*, those you call the Brotherhood of the Dark Path. Since the great break, when we drove them from our forests, Elvandar has been changing, becoming more our place, our home, our essence."

Pug said, "Are the Brothers of the Dark Path truly cousin to the elves?"

Calin's eyes grew hooded. He paused for a moment, then said, "We speak little of such things, for there is much we wish were not true. I can tell you this: there is a bond between the *moredhel*, whom you call the Brotherhood, and my people, though ancient and long strained. We wish it were not so, but they are true cousins to us. Once in a great while one comes back to us, what we call *Returning*." He looked as if the topic were making him very uncomfortable. Pug said, "I'm sorry if-" Calin waved away the apology. "Curiosity is nothing to apologize for in a student, Pug. I just would rather not say more on this subject." They spoke late into the night, of many things. Pug was fascinated by the Elf Prince and was flattered so many things he said seemed to be of interest to Calin. At last Calin said, "I should retire. Though I need little rest, I do need some. And I think you do as well." Pug rose and said, "Thank you for telling me so much." Then he

smiled, half in embarrassment. "And for talking to me about the Princess."

"You needed to talk." Pug led Calin to the long hall, where a servant showed him to his quarters. Pug returned to his room and lay down for sleep, rejoined by a damp Fantus, who snorted in indignation at having to fly through the rain. Fantus was soon asleep. Pug, however, lay staring at the flickering light from his fire pot that danced on the ceiling, unable to call up sleep. He tried to put the tales of strange warriors out of his mind, but images of brightly clad fighters stalking through the forests of the westlands made sleep impossible.

There was a somber mood throughout Castle Crydee the next morning. The servants' gossip had spread the news about the Tsurani, though the details were lacking. Everyone went about his duties with one ear open for a tidbit of speculation on what the Duke was going to do. Everyone was agreed to one thing: Borric conDoin, Duke of Crydee, was not a man to sit idly by waiting. Something would be done, and soon.

Pug sat atop a bale of hay, watching Tomas practice with a sword, swinging at a pell post, hacking backhand, then forehand, over and over. His blows were halfhearted, and finally he threw his sword down with disgust. "I'm not accomplishing a thing." He walked over and sat next to Pug. "I wonder what they're talking about." Pug shrugged. "They" were the Duke's council; today the boys had not been asked to attend, and the last four hours had passed slowly. Abruptly the courtyard became busy as servants began to rush toward the front gate. "Come on," said Tomas. Pug jumped off the bale and followed his friend. They rounded the keep in time to see the guards turning out as they had the day before. It was colder than yesterday, but there was no rain. The boys climbed on the same wagon, and Tomas shivered. "I think the snows will come early this year. Maybe tomorrow."

"If they do, it will be the earliest snowfall in memory. You should have worn your cloak. Now you're all sweaty from the drill, and the air is chilling you." Tomas looked pained. "Gods, you sound like my mother." Pug mimicked an exasperated manner. In a tone that was highpitched and nasal, he said, "And don't come running to me when you're all blue with chill, and coughing and sneezing, looking for comfort, for you'll find none here, Tomas Megarson." Tomas grinned. "Now you sound exactly like her." They turned at the sound of the great doors opening. The Duke and Elf queen led the other guests from the central keep, the Duke holding the queen's hand in a parting gesture of friendship. Then the queen placed her hand to her mouth and sang out a musical series of words, not loud, but carrying over the noise of the crowd. The servants who were standing in the court became silent, and soon the sound of hoofbeats could be heard outside the castle. Twelve white horses ran through the gates and reared up in greeting to the Elf Queen. The elves quickly mounted, each springing up on an elf steed's back without assistance. They raised their hands in salute to the Duke, then turned and raced out the gate. For a few minutes after they were gone, the crowd stood around, as if loath to admit that they had seen their last of the elves, probably their last in this lifetime. Slowly they began to drift back to work. Tomas looked far away, and Pug

turned toward him. "What is it?" Tomas said softly, "I wish I could see Elvandar, someday." Pug understood. "Maybe you will." Then he added, in lighter tones, "But I doubt it. For I will be a magician, and you will be a soldier, and the Queen will reign in Elvandar long after we are dead." Tomas playfully jumped atop his friend, wrestling him down in the straw. "Oh! Is that so. Well, I will too go to Elvandar someday." He pinned Pug under him, sitting atop his chest. "And when I do, I'll be a great hero, with victories over the Tsurani by the score. She'll welcome me as an honored guest. What do you think of that?" Pug laughed, trying to push his friend off. "And I'll be the greatest magician in the land." They both laughed. A voice broke through their play. "Pug! There you are." Tomas got off, and Pug sat up. Approaching them was the stocky

figure of Gardell the smith. He was a barrel-chested man, with little hair but a thick black beard. His arms were grimy with smoke, and his apron was burned through with many small holes. He came to the side of the wagon and placed fists on hips. "I've been looking all over for you. I have that hood Kulgan asked me to fashion for your fire pot."

Pug scrambled out of the wagon, with Tomas close behind. They

walked after Gardell toward the smithy behind the central keep. The burly smith said, "Damned clever idea, that hood. I've worked the forge for nearly thirty years and never thought of using a hood for a fire pot. Had to make one as soon as Kulgan told me of the plan." They entered the smithy, a large shed with a large and small forge and several different-sized anvils. All manner of things lay about waiting for repair: armor, stirrup irons, and kitchen utensils. Gardell walked to the larger forge and picked up the hood. It was about three feet to a side, about three feet high, and formed a cone with a hole at the top. Lengths of round metal pipe lay nearby, fashioned especially thin. Gardell held out his creation for them to study. "I made it fairly thin, using a lot of tin for lightness, for were it too heavy, it would collapse." With his toe he pointed to several lengths of metal rods. "We'll knock some little holes in the floor and use these for support. It may take a bit of time to get it right, but I think this thing of yours is going to work." Pug smiled broadly. He found great pleasure in seeing an idea of his taking concrete form. It was a novel and gratifying sensation. "When can we install it?"

"Now if you like. I would like to see it work, I must confess." Pug gathered up some of the pipe, and Tomas the rest, as well as the rods. Juggling the awkward load, they set out toward the magician's tower, with the chuckling smith following.

Kulgan WAS DEEP in thought as he started to mount the stairs to his room. Suddenly a shout from above sounded: "Watch out!" Kulgan glanced up in time to see a block of stone come tumbling down the stairs, bounding over the steps as if in some fit of drunken craziness. He leapt aside as it struck against the wall where he had stood and came to rest at the bottom of the stairs. Mortar dust filled the air, and Kulgan sneezed. Tomas and Pug came running down the stairs, expressions of worry on their

faces. When they saw no one was hurt, they both looked relieved. Kulgan leveled a baleful gaze upon the pair and said, "What is all this?" Pug appeared sheepish, while Tomas tried to blend in with the wall. Pug spoke first. "We were trying to carry the stone down to the yard, and it sort of slipped."

"Sort of slipped? It looked more like a mad dash for freedom. Now, why were you carrying the stone, and where did it come from?"

"It's the loose one from my wall," answered Pug. "We took it out so that Gardell could put the last pipe in place." When Kulgan still appeared uncomprehending, Pug said, "It's for my fire pot hood, remember?" "Ah," said Kulgan, "yes. Now I do." A servant arrived to investigate the noise, and Kulgan asked him to fetch a couple of workmen from the yard to carry the block away. He left, and Kulgan said to the boys, "I think it would be better to let someone a little larger tote that stone out. Now let us see this marvel." They climbed the stairs to the boy's room and found Gardell installing the last length of pipe. The smith turned when they entered and said, "Well, what do you think?" The pot had been moved a little closer to the wall, and the hood sat on four metal rods of equal length over it. All of the smoke was trapped by the hood and carried away through the light metal pipe. Unfortunately, the hole where the stone was missing was considerably larger than the pipe, so most of the smoke was blown back into the room by the wind. "Kulgan, what do you think?" said Pug. "Well, boy. It looks rather impressive, but I can't see much improvement in the atmosphere here." Gardell gave the hood a solid whack with his hand, causing it to ring out with a tinny sound. His thick calluses kept his hand from being burned by the hot metal. "She'll do, soon as I plug up that hole, magician. I'll fetch some bull hide that I use for making shields for the horsemen and cut a hole in a piece, slip it around the pipe, and nail it to the wall. A few slaps of tanning agent on it, and the heat will dry it out all stiff and hard. It will take the heat and keep the rain and wind out of the room, as well as the smoke." The smith looked pleased with his handiwork. "Well, I'll fetch the hide. Back in a moment." Pug looked as if he would burst from pride, seeing his invention before him, and Tomas reflected Pug's glory. Kulgan chuckled softly to himself for a moment. Suddenly Pug turned to the magician, remembering where he had spent the day. "What is the news from the council?"

"The Duke sends messages to all the nobles of the West, explaining what has occurred in great detail, and asking that the Armies of the West be made ready. I am afraid Tully's scribes have some rigorous days ahead of them, since the Duke wants them all finished as soon as possible. Tully's in a state, for he has been commanded to stay and act as Lyam's adviser, along with Fannon and Algon, during the Duke's absence."

"Lyam's adviser? Absence?" asked

Pug, uncomprehendingly. "Yes, the Duke, Arutha, and I are going to journey to the Free Cities, and on to Kronador, to speak with Prince Erland. I am going to send a dream message to a colleague of mine tonight, if I can. Belgan lives north of Bordon. He will send word to

Meecham, who should be there by now, to find us a ship. The Duke feels it best that he should carry the word in person." Pug and Tomas looked excited. Kulgan knew they both wanted to come along. To visit Krondor would be the greatest adventure of their young lives.

Kulgan stroked his grey beard. "It will be difficult to continue your lessons, but Tully can brush you up on a trick or two." Pug looked as if he were going to burst. "Please, Kulgan, may I come too?" Kulgan feigned surprise. "You come? I never thought of that." He paused for a moment while the suspense built. "Well . . ." Pug's eyes pleaded. ". . . I guess it would be all right." Pug let out a yelp and jumped in the air. Tomas struggled to hide his disappointment. He forced a thin smile and tried to look happy for Pug. Kulgan walked to the door. Pug noticed Tomas's dejected expression. "Kulgan?" Pug said. The magician turned, a faint smile on his lips. "Yes, Pug?" "Tomas, too?" Tomas shook his head, for he was neither a member of the court nor the magician's charge, but his eyes looked at Kulgan imploringly. Kulgan smiled broadly. "I guess we're better off keeping you together, so we need look for trouble in only one place. Tomas, too. I'll arrange things with Fannon." Tomas shouted, and the two boys slapped each other on the back. Pug said, "When do we leave?" Kulgan laughed. "In five days' time. Or sooner, if the Duke hears from the dwarves. Runners are being sent to the North Pass to see if it is clear. If not, we ride by the South Pass." Kulgan departed, leaving the two boys dancing arm in arm and whooping with excitement.

7

UNderstanding

Puc huRRIED ACROss ThE COURtyARD.

Princess Carline had sent him a note asking him to meet her in her flower garden. It was the first word from the girl since she had stormed away from their last meeting, and Pug was anxious. He did not want to be on bad terms with Carline, regardless of any conflicts he might be feeling. After his brief discussion with Calin, two days earlier, he had sought out Father Tully and talked with him at length. The old priest had been willing to take time out to speak with the boy, in spite of the demands the Duke was placing upon his staff. It had been a good talk for Pug, leaving him with a surer sense of himself. The final message from the old cleric had been: Stop worrying about what the Princess feels and thinks, and start discovering what Pug feels and thinks. He had taken the cleric's advice and was now sure of what he would say should Carline start referring to any sort of "understanding" between them. For the first time in weeks he felt something like a sense of direction—even if he was not sure what destination he would eventually reach, holding to such a course. Reaching the Princess's garden, he rounded a corner, then stopped, for instead of Carline, Squire Roland stood by the steps. With a slight smile, Roland nodded. "Good day, Pug."

"Good day, Roland." Pug looked around.

"Expecting someone?" said Roland, forcing a note of lightness that did

little to hide a belligerent tone. He casually rested his left hand on the pommel of his sword. Apart from his sword, he was dressed as usual, in colorful breeches and tunic of green and gold, with tall riding boots. "Well, actually, I was expecting to see the Princess," Pug said, with a small note of defiance in his manner. Roland feigned surprise. "Really? Lady Glynis mentioned something about a note, but I had come to understand things were strained between the two of you . . ." While Pug had tried to sympathize with Roland's situation over the last few days, his offhanded, superior attitude and his chronic antagonism conspired to irritate Pug. Letting his exasperation get the better of him, he snapped, "As one squire to another, Roland, let me put it this way: how things stand between Carline and myself is none of your business.!" -Roland's face took on an expression of open anger. He stepped forward, looking down at the shorter boy. "Be damned it's none of my business! I don't know what you're playing at, Pug, but if you do anything to hurt her, I'll-

"Me hurt her!" Pug interrupted. He was shocked by the intensity of Roland's anger and infuriated by the threat. "She's the one playing us one against the other-" Abruptly Pug felt the ground tilt under him, rising up to strike him from behind. Lights exploded before his eyes and a bell-like clanging sounded in his ears. It was a long moment before he realized Roland had just hit him. Pug shook his head and his eyes refocused. He saw the older, larger squire standing over him, both hands balled into fists. Through tightly clenched teeth, Roland spat his words. "If you ever say ill of her again, I'll beat you senseless." Pug's anger fired within him, rising each second. He got carefully to his feet, his eyes upon Roland, who stood ready to fight. Feeling the bitter taste of anger in his mouth, Pug said, "You've had two years and more to win her, Roland. Leave it alone." Roland's face grew livid and he charged, bowling Pug off his feet. They went down in a tangle, Roland striking Pug harmlessly on the shoulders and arms. Rolling and grappling, neither could inflict much damage. Pug got his arm around Roland's neck and hung on as the older squire thrashed in a frenzy. Suddenly Roland wedged a knee against Pug's chest and shoved him away. Pug rolled and came to his feet. Roland was up an instant later, and they squared off. Roland's expression had changed from rage to cold, calculating anger as he measured the distance between them. He advanced carefully, his left arm bent and extended, his right fist held ready before his face. Pug had no experience with this form of fighting, called fist-boxing, though he had seen it practiced for money in traveling shows. Roland had demonstrated on several occasions that he had more than a passing acquaintance with the sport. Pug sought to take the advantage and swung a wild, roundhouse blow at Roland's head. Roland dodged back as Pug swung completely around; then the squire jumped forward, his left hand snapping out, catching Pug on the cheek, rocking his head back with a stinging blow. Pug stumbled away, and Roland's right hand missed Pug's chin by a fraction. Pug held up his hands to ward off another blow and shook his head, clearing it of the dancing lights that obscured his vision, barely managing to duck beneath Roland's next blow. Under Roland's guard, Pug lunged, catching the other boy in the stomach with his shoulder, knock-ing him down

again. Pug fell on top of him and struggled to pin the larger boy's arms to his side. Roland struck out, catching Pug's temple with an elbow, and the dazed magician's apprentice fell away, momentarily confused. As he rose to his feet again, pain exploded in Pug's face, and the world tilted once more. Disoriented, unable to defend himself, Pug felt Roland's blows as distant events, somehow muted and not fully recognized by his reeling senses. A faint note of alarm sounded in part of Pug's mind. Without warning, processes began to occur under the level of pain-dimmed consciousness. Basic, more animal instincts took hold, and in a disjointed, hardly understood awareness, a new force emerged. As in the encounter with the trolls, blinding letters of light and flame appeared in his mind's eye, and he silently incanted. Pug's being became primitive. In his remaining consciousness he was a primal creature fighting for survival with murderous intent. All he could envision was choking the very life from his adversary. Suddenly an alarm rang within Pug's mind. A deep sense of wrong-ness, of evil, struck him. Months of training came to the fore, and it was as if he could hear Kulgan's voice crying, "This is not how the power is to be used!" Ripping aside the mental shroud that covered him, Pug opened his eyes. Through blurred vision and sparkling lights, Pug saw Roland kneeling a mere yard before him, eyes enlarged, vainly struggling with the invisible fingers around his neck. Pug felt no sense of contact with what he saw, and with returning clarity of mind knew at once what had occurred. Leaning forward, he seized Roland's wrists. "Stop it, Roland! Stop it! It isn't real. There are no hands but your own at your throat." Roland, blind with panic, seemed unable to hear Pug's shouts. Mustering what remaining strength he possessed, Pug yanked Roland's hands away, then struck him a stinging slap to the face. Roland's eyes teared and suddenly he breathed in, a gasping, ragged sound. Still panting, Pug said, "It's an illusion. You were choking yourself." Roland gasped and pushed himself back from Pug, fear evident on his face. He struggled weakly to pull his sword. Pug leaned forward and firmly gripped Roland's wrist. Hardly able to speak, he shook his head and said, "There's no reason." Roland looked into Pug's eyes, and the fear in his own began to subside. Something inside the elder squire seemed to break, and there was only a fatigued, drained young man sitting on the ground. Breathing heavily, Roland sat back, tears forming in his eyes, and asked, "Why?" Pug's own fatigue made him lean back, supporting himself on his hands. He studied the handsome young face before him, twisted by doubt. "Because you're held under a spell more compelling than any I could fashion." He looked Roland in the eyes. "You truly love her, don't you?"

The last vestige of Roland's anger slowly evaporated and his eyes showed some slight fear remaining, but also Pug saw deep pain and anguish as a tear fell to his cheek. His shoulders slumped and he nodded, his breath ragged as he tried to speak. For a moment he was on the verge of crying, but he fought off his pain and regained his poise. Taking a deep breath, Roland wiped away the tears and took another deep breath. He looked directly at Pug, then guardedly asked, "And you?" Pug sprawled on the ground, feeling some strength returning. "I . . . I'm not sure. She makes me doubt myself. I don't know. Sometimes I think of no one else, and



other times I wish I were as far from her as I could be." Roland indicated understanding, the last residue of fear draining away. "where she's concerned, I don't have a whit of wit." Pug giggled. Roland looked at him, then also began to laugh. "I don't know why," said Pug, "but for some reason, I find what you said terribly funny." Roland nodded and began to laugh too. Soon they were both sitting with tears running down their faces as the emotional vacuum left by the fleeing anger was replaced by giddiness. Roland recovered slightly, holding back the laughter, when Pug looked at him and said, "A whit of wit!" which sent both of them off on another jag of laughter. "Well!" a voice said sharply. They turned and found Carline, flanked by two ladies-in-waiting, surveying the scene before her. Instantly both boys became silent. Casting a disapproving look upon the pair as they sprawled upon the ground, she said, "Since you two seem so taken with each other, I'll not intrude." Pug and Roland exchanged looks and suddenly erupted into uproarious laughter. Roland fell over backward, while Pug sat, legs stretched before him, laughing into his cupped hands.

Carline flushed angrily and her eyes widened. With cold fury in her voice she said "Excuse me!" and turned, sweeping by her ladies. As she left, they could hear her loudly exclaim, "Boys!" Pug and Roland sat for a minute until the near-hysterical fit passed, then Roland rose and extended his hand to Pug. Pug took it and Roland helped him to his feet. "Sorry, Pug. I had no right to be angry with you." His voice softened. "I can't sleep nights thinking of her. I wait for the few moments we're together each day. But since you saved her, all I ever hear is your name." Touching his sore neck, Roland said, "I got so angry, I thought I'd kill you. Damn near got myself killed instead." Pug looked at the corner where the Princess had disappeared, nodding agreement. "I'm sorry, too, Roland. I'm not very good at controlling magic yet, and when I lose my temper, it seems all sorts of terrible things can happen. Like with the trolls." Pug wanted Roland to understand he was still Pug, even though he was now a magician's apprentice. "I would never do something like that on purpose~specially to a friend." Roland studied Pug's face a moment and grinned, half-wryly, half-apologetically. "I understand. I acted badly. You were right: she's only setting us one against the other. I am the fool. It's you she cares for." Pug seemed to wilt. "Believe me, Roland, I'm not so sure I'm to be envied." Roland's grin widened. "She is a strong-willed girl, that's clear." Caught halfway between an open display of self-pity and mock-bravado, Roland selected mock-bravado. Pug shook his head. "What's to be done, Roland?" Roland looked surprised, then laughed loudly. "Don't look to me for advice, Pug. I dance to her tune more than any. But 'there are as many changes in a young girl's heart as in the fickle winds,' as the old saying goes. I'll not blame you for Carline's actions." He winked at Pug conspiratorially. "Still, you won't mind if I keep an eye out for a change in the weather?" Pug laughed in spite of his exhaustion. "I thought you seemed a little too gracious in your concessions." A thoughtful look came over his face. "You know, it would be simpler-not better, but simpler-if she'd ignore me forever, Roland. I don't know what to think about all this. I've got my apprenticeship to complete. Someday I'll have estates to manage.

Then there's this business with the Tsurani. It's all come so quickly, I don't know what to do." Roland regarded Pug with some sympathy. He put his hand upon the younger boy's shoulder. "I forget this business of being apprentice and noble is all rather new to you. Still, I can't say I've given too much time to such weighty considerations myself, even though my lot was decided before I was born. This worrying about the future is a dry sort of work. I think it would be benefited by a mug of strong ale." Feeling his aches and bruises, Pug nodded agreement. "Would that we could. But Megar will be of a different mind, I'm afraid."

Roland placed his finger alongside his nose. "We shan't let the Mastercook smell us out, then. Come on, I know a place where the boards of the ale shed are loose. We can quaff a cup or two in private."

Roland began to walk away, but Pug halted him by saying, "Roland, I am sorry we came to blows." Roland stopped, studied Pug a moment, and grinned. "And I." He extended his hand. "A peace." Pug gripped it. "A peace." They turned the corner, leaving the Princess's garden behind, then stopped. Before them was a scene of unalloyed misery. Tomas was walking the length of the court, from the soldiers' commons to the side gate, in full rstood a chain mail over gambeson, full helm, and heavy metal greaves over knee boots. On one arm he bore a greater shield, and in the other hand he held a heavy spear, twelve feet long and iron-tipped, which bore down cruelly upon his right shoulder. It also gave him a comic appearance, as it caused him to lean a little to the right and wobble slightly as he struggled to keep it balanced while he marched. The sergeant of the Duke's Guard stood counting out cadence for him. Pug knew the sergeant, a tall, friendly man named Gardan. He was Keshian by ancestry, evident in his dark skin. His white teeth split his dark, nappy beard in a grin at the sight of Pug and Roland. He stood nearly as broad in the shoulders as Meecham, with the same loose-gaited movement of a hunter or fighter. Though his black hair was lightly dusted with grey, his face was young-looking and unlined, despite thirty years' service. With a wink at Pug and Roland, he barked, "Halt!" and Tomas stopped in his tracks. As Pug and Roland closed the distance between them, Gardan snapped, "Right turn!" Tomas obeyed. "Members of the court approaching. Present arms!" Tomas extended his right arm, and his spear dipped in salute. He let the tip drop slightly too low, and nearly broke from attention to pull it back.

Pug and Roland came up to stand next to Gardan, and the large

soldier gave them a casual salute and a warm smile. "Good day,

Squires." He turned to Tomas for a moment. "Shoulder arms! March post . . . march!" Tomas set off, marching the "post" assigned to him, in this case the length of the yard before the soldiers' commons. With a laugh, Roland said, "What is this? Special drills?" Gardan stood with one hand on his sword, the other pointed at Tomas. "Swordmaster Fannon felt it might prove beneficial to our young warrior if someone was here to see his drilling didn't become sloppy from exhaustion or some other petty inconvenience." Dropping his voice a bit, he added, "He's a tough lad,

he'll be fine, if a little foot-sore."

"Why the special drilling?"

asked Roland. Pug shook his head as Gardan told them. "Our young hero lost two swords. The first was understandable, for the matter of the ship was vital, and in the excitement of the moment such an oversight could be forgiven. But the second was found lying on the wet ground near the pell the afternoon the Elf Queen and her party left, and young Tomas was nowhere in sight." Pug knew Tomas had forgotten all about returning to his drilling when Gardell had come with the hood for his fire pot. Tomas reached the end of his appointed route, did an about-face, and began his return. Gardan regarded the two bruised and dirty boys and said, "What have you two young gentlemen been up to?" Roland cleared his throat in a theatrical fashion and said, "Ah . . . I was giving Pug a fist-boxing lesson." Gardan reached out and took Pug's chin in his hand, turning the

boy's face for inspection. Evaluating the damage, he said, "Roland, remind me never to ask you to instruct my men in swordplay—we couldn't withstand the casualty rate." Releasing his hold upon Pug's face, he said, "You'll have a beautiful eye in the morning, Squire." Changing the topic, Pug said, "How are your sons, Gardan?"

"Well enough, Pug. They learn

their craft and dream of making themselves rich, save for the youngest, Faxon, who is still intent on becoming a soldier next Choosing. The rest are becoming expert cart-wrights under my brother Jehell's tutelage." He smiled sadly. "With only Faxon at home the house is very empty, though my wife seems glad for the peace." Then he grinned, an infectious smile that rarely could be viewed and not answered. "Still, it won't be too long before the elder boys marry, and then there'll be grandchildren under foot and plenty of merry noise again, from time to time." As Tomas drew near, Pug asked, "May I speak with the condemned?"

Gardan laughed, stroking his short beard. "I guess I might look the other way for a moment, but be brief, Squire." Pug left Gardan talking with Roland and fell into step beside Tomas as he passed on his way to the opposite end of the court. "How goes it?" Pug asked. Out of the side of his mouth, Tomas said, "Oh, just fine. Two more hours of this and I'll be ready for burial."

"Can't you rest?"

"On the half hour I get five minutes to stand at attention."

He reached the terminus of his post and did a reasonably sharp about-face, then resumed walking back toward Gardan and Roland. "After the fire-pot cover was finished, I came back to the pell and found the sword missing. I thought my heart would stop. I looked everywhere. I almost thrashed Rulf, thinking he had hidden it to spite me. When I returned to the commons, Fannon was sitting on my bunk, oiling down the

blade. I thought the other soldiers would hurt themselves holding in the laughter when he said, 'If you judge yourself skilled enough with the sword, perhaps you'd care to spend your time learning the proper way to walk post with a poll arm.' All day walking punishment," he added

woefully. "I'll die." They passed Roland and Gardan, and Pug struggled to feel sympathy. Like the others, he found the situation comical. Hiding his amusement, he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone and said, "I'd better get along. Should the Swordmaster come along, he might tack on an extra day's marching." Tomas groaned at the thought. "Gods preserve me. Get away, Pug." Pug whispered, "When you're done, join us in the ale shed if you're able." Pug left Tomas's side and rejoined Gardan and Roland. To the sergeant he said, "Thank you, Gardan." "You are welcome, Pug. Our young knight-in-the-making will be fine, though he feels set upon now. He also chafes at having an audience." Roland nodded. "Well, I expect he'll not be losing a sword again soon." Gardan laughed. "Too true. Master Fannon could forgive the first, but not the second. He thought it wise to see Tomas didn't make a habit of it. Your friend is the finest student the Swordmaster has known since Prince Arutha, but don't tell Tomas that. Fannon's always hardest on those with the most potential. Well, good day to you both, Squires. And, boys,"-they paused-"I won't mention the fist-boxing lesson." They thank the sergeant for his discretion and walked toward the ale shed, with the measured cadence of Gardan's voice filling the court.

Pug was well into his second mug of ale and Roland finishing his fourth when Tomas appeared through the loose boards. Dirty and sweating, he was rid of his armor and weapons. With a great display of fatigue, he said, "The world must be coming to an end; Fannon excused me from punishment early."

"Why?" asked Pug. Roland lazily reached over to a storage shelf, next to where he sat upon a sack of grain soon to be used for making ale, and got a cup from a stack. He tossed it to Tomas, who caught it, then filled it from the hogshead of ale that Roland rested his feet upon. Taking a deep drink, Tomas wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, "Something's afoot. Fannon swooped down, told me to put away my toys, and nearly dragged Gardan off, he was in such a hurry." Pug said, "Maybe the Duke is getting ready to ride east." Tomas said, "Maybe." He studied his two friends, taking note of their freshly bruised countenances. "All right. what happened?" Pug regarded Roland, indicating he should explain the sad state of their appearance. Roland gave Tomas a lopsided grin and said, "We had a practice bout in preparation for the Duke's fist-boxing tourney." Pug nearly choked on his ale, then laughed. Tomas shook his head. "If you two don't look a pair. Fighting over the Princess?" Pug and Roland exchanged glances, then as one they leaped at Tomas and bore him to the floor under their combined weight. Roland pinned Tomas to the floor, then, while Pug held him in place, took a half-filled cup of ale and held it high. With mock solemnity Roland said, "I hereby anoint thee, Tomas, First Seer of Crydee!" So saying, he poured the contents of the cup over the struggling boy's face. Pug belched, then said, "As do I." He poured what remained in his cup over his friend. Tomas spat ale, laughing as he said, "Right! I was right!" Struggling against the weight upon him, he said, "Now get off! Or need I remind you, Roland, of who gave you your last bloody nose?" Roland moved off very slowly, intoxicated dignity forcing him to move with glacial precision. "Quite right." Turning toward Pug, who had

also rolled off Tomas, he said, "Still, it must be made clear that at the time, the only reason Tomas managed to bloody my nose is that during our fight he had an unfair advantage." ~ Pug looked at Roland through bleary eyes and said, "What unfair advantage?" Roland put his finger to his lips indicating secrecy, then said, "He was winning."

Roland collapsed back upon the grain sack and Pug and Tomas dissolved into laughter. Pug found the remark so funny, he couldn't stop, and hearing Tomas's laughter only caused his own to redouble. At last he sat up, gasping, with his sides hurting. Catching his breath, Pug said, "I missed that set-to. I was doing something else, but I don't remember what."

"You were down in the village learning to mend nets, if I remember rightly, when Roland first came here from Tulan." With a crooked grin Roland said, "I got into an argument with some-one or another-do you remember who?" Tomas shook his head no. "Anyway, I got into an argument, and Tomas came over and tried to break it up. I couldn't believe this skinny boy-" Tomas began to voice an objection, but Roland cut him off, holding a finger upright and wiggling it. "Yes, you were. Very skinny. I couldn't believe this skinny boy-skinny common boy-would presume to tell me-a newly appointed member of the Duke's court and a gentleman, I must add-the way to behave. So I did the only thing a proper gentleman could do under the circumstances." "What?" asked Pug. "I hit him in the mouth." The three laughed again. Tomas shook his head at the recollection, while Roland said, "Then he proceeded to give me the worst beating I had since the last time my father caught me out at something. "That's when I got serious about fist-boxing." With an air of mock gravity, Tomas said, "Well, we were younger then." Pug refilled the cups. Moving his jaw in discomfort, he said, "Well, right now I feel about a hundred years old." Tomas studied them both a moment. "Seriously, what was the fight

about?" With a mixture of humor and regret, Roland said, "Our liege lord's daughter, a girl of ineffable charm . . ." "What's ineffable?"

Tomas asked. Roland looked at him with intoxicated disdain.

"Indescribable, dolt!" Tomas shook his head. "I don't think the Princess is an indescribable dolt-" He ducked as Roland's cup sailed through the space occupied by his head an instant before. Pug fell over backward laughing again. Tomas grinned as Roland, in a display of great ceremony, fetched down another cup from the shelf. "As I was saying," he began, filling the cup from the hogshead, "our lady, a girl of ineffable charms-if somewhat questionable judgment-has taken it into her head-for reasons only the gods may fully comprehend-to favor our young magician here with her attentions. Why-when she could spend time with me-I can't imagine." He paused to belch.

"In any event, we were discussing the proper manner in which to accept such largess." Tomas looked at Pug, a huge grin on his face. "You have my sympathy, Pug. You most certainly have your hands full." Pug felt himself blush. Then with a wicked leer, he said, "Do

I? And what about a certain young apprentice soldier, well-known hereabouts, who has been seen sneaking into the larder with a certain

kitchen girl?" He leaned back and with a look of mock concern etched upon his face added, "I'd hate to think what would happen to him should Neala find out."

Tomas's mouth fell open. "You wouldn't . . . you couldn't!" Roland lay back, holding his sides. "Never have I seen such a fair impersonation of a freshly landed fish!" He sat up, crossed his eyes, and opened and shut his mouth rapidly. All three degenerated into helpless mirth again. Another round was poured, and Roland held up his cup. "Gentlemen, a toast!" Pug and Tomas held up their cups. Roland's voice turned serious, and he said, "No matter what differences we have had in the past, you are two fellows I gladly count friends." He held his cup higher and said, "To friendship!" The three drained their cups and refilled them. Roland said, "Your hand upon it." The three boys joined hands, and Roland said, "No matter where we go, no matter how many years pass, never again shall we be without friends." Pug was struck by the sudden solemnity of the pledge and said,

"Friends!" Tomas echoed Pug's words, and the three shook hands in a gesture of affirmation. Again the cups were drained, and the afternoon sun quickly fled beyond the horizon as the three boys lost time in the rosy glow of camaraderie and ale.

Pug CAME AWAKE, groggy and disoriented. The faint glow from his nearly extinguished fire pot cast the room into halftones of rose and black. A faint but persistent knocking sounded on his door. He slowly stood, then nearly fell, still intoxicated from his drinking bout. He had stayed with Tomas and Roland in the storage room all evening and into the night, missing supper entirely. "Putting a considerable dent" in the castle's ale supply, as Roland had described it. They hadn't partaken of any great amount, but as their capacity was slight, it seemed a heroic undertaking. Pug drew on his trousers and wobbled over to the door. His eyelids felt gritty, and his mouth was cotton dry. Wondering who could be demanding entrance in the middle of the night, he threw aside the door. A blur of motion passed him, and he turned to find Carline standing in the room, a heavy cloak wrapped around her. "Close the door!" she hissed. "Someone might pass the base of the tower and see light upon the stairway." Pug obeyed, still disoriented. The only thing that penetrated his numb mind was the thought that it was unlikely the faint light from the coals would cast much brightness down the stairwell. He shook his head, gathering his wits about him, and crossed to the fire pot. He lit a taper from the coals and lit his lantern. The room sprang into cheery brightness. Pug's thinking began to pick up a little as Carline looked about the room, taking stock of the disorderly pile of books and scrolls next to the pallet. She peered into every corner of the room, then said, "Where is that dragon thing you keep about?" Pug's eyes focused a little, and marshaling his balky tongue, he said, "Fantus? He's off somewhere, doing whatever it is firebrakes do." Removing her cloak, she said, "Good. He frightens me." She sat on Pug's unmade pallet and looked sternly at him. "I want to speak with you." Pug's eyes went wide, and he stared, for Carline was wearing only a light cotton sleeping gown. While

covering her from neck to ankles, it was thin and clung to her figure with alarming tenacity. Pug suddenly realized he was dressed only in trousers and hurriedly grabbed up his tunic from where he had dropped it onto the floor and pulled it over his head. As he struggled with the shirt, the last shreds of alcoholic fog evaporated. "Gods!" he said, in a pained whisper. "Should your father learn of this, he'd have my head." "Not if you've wits enough to keep your voice lowered," she answered with a petulant look. Pug crossed to the stool near his pallet, freed of his drunken wobble by newly arrived terror. She studied his rumpled appearance and with a note of disapproval in her voice said, "You've been drinking." When he didn't deny it, she added, "When you and Roland didn't appear at supper, I wondered where you'd gotten yourselves off to. It's a good thing Father also skipped the meal with the court, otherwise he'd have sent someone to find you."

Pug's discomfort was growing at an alarming rate as every tale of what horrible fate awaits lowborn lovers of noblewomen rushed back into his memory. That Carline was an uninvited guest and that nothing untoward had occurred were niceties he didn't think the Duke would find particularly mitigating. Gulping down panic, Pug said, "Carline, you can't stay here. You'll get us both into more trouble than I can imagine."

Her expression became determined. "I'm not leaving until I tell you what I came to say." Pug knew it was futile to argue. He had seen that look too many times in the past. With a resigned sigh, he said, "All right, then, what is it?" Carline's eyes widened at his tone. "Well, if that's how you're going to be, I won't tell you!" Pug suppressed a groan and sat back with his eyes closed. Slowly shaking his head, he said, "Very well. I'm sorry. Please, what do you want me to do?" She patted the pallet next to her. "Come, sit here." He complied, trying to ignore the feeling that his fate-an abruptly short life-was being decided by this capricious girl. He landed rather than sat beside her. She giggled at the groan he made. "You got drunk! What's it like?"

"At this moment, not terribly entertaining. I feel like a used kitchen rag." She tried to look sympathetic, but her blue eyes sparkled with mirth. With a theatrical pout, she said, "You boys get to do all the interesting things, like sword work and archery. Being a proper lady can be such a bore. Father would have a fit if I should ever drink more than a cup of watered wine with supper." With rising desperation in his voice, Pug said, "Nothing compared to the fit he will have if you're found here. Carline, why did you come here?"

She ignored the question. "What were you and Roland doing this afternoon, fighting?" He nodded. "Over me?" she asked, a glimmer in her eyes. Pug sighed. "Yes, over you." Her pleased look at the reply nettled him, and irritation crept into his voice. "Carline, you've used him rather badly."

"He's a spineless idiot!" she snapped back. "If I asked him to jump off the wall, he'd do it."

"Carline," Pug nearly whined, "why have-" His question was cut off as she leaned forward and covered his mouth with her own. The kiss was one-sided, for Pug was too stunned to respond.

She quickly sat back, leaving him agape, and she said, "Well?" Lacking any original response, Pug said, "What?" Her eyes flashed. "The kiss, you simpleton."

"Oh!" said Pug, still in shock. "It was . . . nice."

She rose and looked down on him, her eyes widening with mixed

anger and embarrassment. She crossed her arms and stood tapping her foot, making a sound like summer hail striking the window shutters. Her tone was low and harsh. "Nice! Is that all you have to say?" Pug watched her, a variety of conflicting emotions surging inside. At this moment panic was contesting with a nearly painful awareness of how lovely she looked in the dim lantern light, her features alive and animated, her dark hair loose around her face, and the thin shift pulled tight across her bosom by her crossed arms. His own confusion made his pose seem unintentionally casual, which further fueled her petulance. "You're the first man-not counting Father and my brothers-I've ever kissed, and all you can say is 'nice.'" Pug was unable to recover. Still awash with tumultuous emotions, he blurted, "Very nice." She placed her hands upon her hips-which pulled her nightdress in disturbing new directions and stood looking down on him with an expression of open disbelief. In controlled tones she said, "I come here and throw myself at you. I risk getting myself banished to a convent for life!" Pug noticed she failed to mention his possible fate. "Every other boy-and not a slight number of the older nobles-in the West fall over themselves to get my attention. And all you do is treat me like some common kitchen drudge, a passing amusement for the young lord." Pug's wits returned, less of their own accord than from the realization that Carline was arguing her case a little more emphatically than was warranted. Suddenly struck with the insight that there was a fair bit of dramatics mixed in with her genuine irritation, he said, "Carline, wait. Give me a moment."

"A moment! I've given you weeks. I thought . . . well, I thought we had an understanding." Pug tried to look sympathetic, as his mind raced. "Sit down, please. Let me try to explain." She hesitated, then returned to sit next to him. Somewhat clumsily he took her hands in his own. Instantly he was struck by the nearness of the girl, her warmth, the smell of her hair and skin. The feelings of desire he had felt on the bluffs returned with stunning impact, and he had to fight to keep his mind upon what he wished to say. Forcing his thoughts away from the hot surge he experienced, he said,

"Carline, I do care for you. A great deal. Sometimes I even think I love you as much as Roland does, but most of the time I only get confused when you're around. That's the problem: there's so much confusion inside of me. I don't understand what it is I feel most of the time." Her eyes narrowed, for this obviously wasn't the answer she expected. Her tone was sharp as she said, "I don't know what you mean. I've never known a boy so caught up in understanding things." Pug managed to force a smile.

"Magicians are trained to seek explanations. Understanding things is very important to us." He saw a flicker of comprehension in her eyes at this and pressed on. "I have two offices now, both new to me. I may not become a magician, in spite of Kulgan's attempts to make me one, for I have trouble with a lot of my work. I don't really avoid you, you see,



but with this trouble I have, I must spend as much time with my studies as I can." Seeing his explanation was gaining little sympathy, he changed tactics. "In any event, I have little time to consider my other office. I may end up another noble of your father's court, running my estates-small though they might be-caring for my tenants, answering calls to arms, and the rest. But I can't even think of that until I resolve this other matter, my studies of magic. I must keep trying until I'm satisfied I made the wrong choice. Or until Kulgan dismisses me," he added quietly. He stopped and studied her face. Her large blue eyes watched him intently. "Magicians are of little consequence in the Kingdom. I mean, should I become a master magician . . . Well, could you see yourself married to a magician, whatever his rank?" She looked slightly alarmed. Quickly she leaned over and kissed him again, rupturing his already frayed composure. "Poor Pug," she said, pulling away a little. Her soft voice rang sweetly to his ears. "You don't have to be. A magician, I mean. You have land and title, and I know Father could arrange others when the time was right."

"It's not a question of what I want, don't you see? It's a question of what I am. Part of the problem may be I haven't truly given myself over to my work. Kulgan took me for his apprentice as much from pity as need, you know. And in spite of what he and Tully have said, I've never been really convinced I was especially talented. But perhaps I need to dedicate myself, commit myself to becoming a magician." He took a breath. "How can I do that if I'm concerning myself with my estates ~ and offices? Or gaining new ones?" He paused. "Or you?" Carline bit her lower lip slightly, and Pug fought down the urge to take her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right. He had no doubt that once he did that, matters would quickly be beyond his control. No girl in his limited experience, even the prettier ones in the town, aroused such strong feelings in him. Lowering her lashes a little as she looked down, she softly said, "I'll do whatever you say, Pug." Pug felt relief for a moment, then the full impact of what she had just said hit him. Oh, gods! he thought. No magician's trick could keep him focused in the face of youthful passion. He frantically sought some way to drive desire from him and then thought of her father. Instantly an image of a scowling Duke of Crydee standing before the hangman's gibbet banished most of his lust. Taking a deep breath, Pug said, "In my own way, I do love you, Carline." Her face came aglow, and forfending disaster, he plunged on.

"But I think I should try to find out about myself before I try to make up my mind about the rest." His concentration was sorely tested as the girl seemed to ignore his remarks, being busy kissing his face. Then she stopped and sat back. Her happy expression faded into one of thoughtfulness as her natural intelligence overrode her childish need to get everything she wanted. Comprehension came into her eyes as he said, "If I chose now, Carline, I might always doubt the choice. Would you want to face the possibility I would come to resent you for the choice I made?" She said nothing for a while, then quietly said, "No. I don't think I could stand that, Pug."

He breathed a sigh of relief as he felt tension drain away. Suddenly the room seemed cold, and both of them shivered. Carline gripped his hands

tight, with surprising strength. She mustered a smile and said, with forced calm, "I understand, Pug." She took a long breath, then softly added, "That's why I think I love you. You could never be false with anyone. Least of all with yourself."

"Or you, Carline." Her eyes grew moist, but she maintained her smile. "This isn't easy," Pug said, assaulted by feelings for the girl.

"Please, please, believe me, this is not easy." Suddenly the tension broke, and Carline laughed softly, sweet music to Pug. Caught halfway between tears and laughter, she said, "Poor Pug. I've upset you." Pug's face showed his relief at her understanding. He felt buoyant with his affection for the girl. Shaking his head slowly, with a smile of released tension that gave him a somewhat silly expression, he said, "You've no idea, Carline. No idea." He reached out and touched her face tenderly. "We have time. I'm not going anywhere." From under lowered lashes, blue eyes regarded him with worry.

"You'll be leaving with Father soon."

"I mean when I return. I'll be here for years." Gently he kissed her cheek. Forcing a lighter tone, he said, "I can't inherit for three more years, that's the law. And I doubt your father would part with you for as many years yet." Attempting a wry smile, he added, "In three years you might not be able to stand the sight of me." She came softly into his arms, holding him tightly, her face resting on his shoulder. "Never, Pug. I could never care for another." Pug could only marvel at the feel of her. Her body trembled as she said, "I don't have words, Pug. You're the only one who tried to . . . understand me. You see more than anyone else." Gently he pulled back a little and raised up her face with his hand. Again he kissed her, tasting salty tears upon her lips. She suddenly responded, holding him tighter and kissing him with passion. He could feel the heat of her body through the thin fabric of her gown, and heard soft sighing sounds in his ear as he felt himself drifting back into mindless passion, his own body beginning to respond. Steeling his resolve, he gently disengaged himself from Carline's embrace. Slowly he forced himself away from her and, with regret in his voice, said, "I think you should return to your rooms, Carline." Carline looked up at Pug, her cheeks flushed and her lips slightly parted. Her breathing was husky, and Pug fought a mighty struggle to control himself and the situation. More firmly, he said, "You had best return to your rooms, now." They rose slowly from the sleeping pallet, each intensely aware of the other. Pug held her hand a moment longer, then released it. He bent and retrieved her cloak, holding it for her as she slipped into it. Guiding her to the door, he pulled it open and peered down the steps of the tower. With no hint of anyone nearby, he opened the door fully. She stepped through, then turned. Softly she said, "I know you think me a sometimes silly and vain girl, and there are times when I am, Pug. But I do love you."

Before he could say a word, she vanished down the stairs, the faint rustling of her cloak echoing in the darkness. Pug quietly closed the door and then put out the lamp. He lay upon his pallet, staring up into

the darkness. He could still smell her fresh scent in the air around him, and the remembered touch of her soft body under his hands made them tingle. Now that she was gone and the need for self-control gone with her, he let longing rush through himself. He could see her face alive with desire for him. Covering his eyes with his forearm, he groaned softly to himself and said, "I'm going to hate myself tomorrow."

Pug AWOKE to pounding on the door. His first thought as he scrambled toward the door was of the Duke having learned of Carline's visit. He's here to hang me! was all he could think. It was still dark outside, so Pug opened the door expecting the worst. Instead of the girl's angry father leading a company of castle guards, a castle porter stood outside the door. "Sorry to wake you, Squire, but Master Kulgan wishes you to join him at once," he said, pointing up toward Kulgan's room. "At once," he repeated, mistaking Pug's expression of relief for one of sleepy confusion. Pug nodded and shut the door. He took stock. He was still dressed, having fallen asleep again without undressing. He stood quietly as his pounding heart stilled. His eyes felt as if they were packed with sand, and his stomach was upset, leaving a foul taste in his mouth. He went to his small table and splashed cold water on his face, muttering that he would never have another cup of ale again. Pug reached Kulgan's room and found the magician standing over a pile of personal belongings and books. Sitting on a stool by the magician's sleeping pallet was Father Tully. The priest watched the magician adding to the steadily growing pile and said, "Kulgan, you can't take all those books along. You would need two pack mules for them, and where you would keep them aboard ship where they would do you any good is beyond me." Kulgan looked at two books he held, like a mother regarding her young. "But I must take them along to further the boy's education." "Pah! So you'll have something to mull over around the campfires and aboard ship, more likely. Spare me excuses. You will be riding hard to clear the South Pass before it is snowed in. And who can read in a ship crossing the Bitter Sea in winter? The boy will only be away from his studies a month or two. He'll have over eight years more study after that. Give him a rest." Pug was perplexed by the conversation and tried to ask a question, but was ignored by the two old companions as they bickered. After several more remonstrations from Tully, Kulgan surrendered. "I suppose you're right," he said, tossing the books onto his pallet. He saw Pug waiting by the door and said, "What? Still here?" Pug said, "You haven't told me why you sent for me yet, Kulgan." "Oh?" Kulgan said, eyes blinking wide like those of a barn owl caught in a bright light. "I haven't?" Pug nodded. "Well, then. The Duke orders us ready to ride at first light. The dwarves have not answered, but he will not wait. The North Pass is almost certain to be closed, and he fears snow in the South Pass." Kulgan said as an aside, "Which he should. My weather nose tells me snow is nearly here. We are in for an early and hard winter." Tully shook his head as he stood up. "This from the man who predicted drought seven years ago, when we had the worst flooding in memory. Magicians! Charlatans, all of you." He walked slowly to the door, then

stopped to look at Kulgan, his mock irritation replaced by genuine concern. "Though you are right this time, Kulgan. My bones ache deeply. Winter is upon us." Tully left and Pug asked, "We're leaving?" With exasperation, Kulgan said, "Yes! I just said so, didn't I? Get your things together and quickly. Dawn's less than an hour away." Pug turned to leave, when Kulgan said, "Oh, a moment, Pug." The magician crossed to the door and glanced through it, ensuring Tully was down the stairs and out of earshot. Kulgan turned to Pug and said, "I have no fault to find with your behavior . . . but should you in the future find yourself with another late-night caller, I suggest you not subject yourself to further . . . testing. I'm not so sure you would do as well a second time." Pug blanched. "You heard?" Kulgan pointed to a spot where the floor and wall met. "That fire-pot thing of yours exits the wall a foot below there, and it seems a marvelous conduit for sound." Absently he said, "I'll have to look to see how it conducts sound so well when we return." Returning to the boy, he said, "In any event, I was working late and didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I heard every word." Pug flushed. Kulgan said, "I don't mean to embarrass you, Pug. You acted rightly and showed surprising wisdom." Putting his hand upon Pug's shoulder, he said, "I'm not one to advise you in such matters, I fear, as I've had scant experience with women, of any age, let alone such young and headstrong ones." Looking Pug in the eyes, he said, "But this much I do know, it is almost impossible in the heat of the moment to understand long-term consequences. I am proud you were able to do this." Pug smiled self-consciously. "It was easy enough, Kulgan, I just kept my mind focused on something." "What?"

"Capital punishment." Kulgan laughed, a sharp barking sound, then said, "Very well, but the potential for disaster would be as high for the Princess, too, Pug. A city-bred noblewoman of the eastern court may indulge herself in as many lovers of any rank that she can enjoy while maintaining discretion, but the only daughter of a frontierduke who is so closely related to the king has no such luxury. She must be above suspicion in all things. Even suspicion could harm Carline. One who cares for her would take that into consideration. Do you understand?" Pug nodded, fully relieved now that he had resisted temptation the night before. "Good, I know you'll be careful in the future." Kulgan smiled. "And don't mind old Tully. He's just cross because the Duke ordered him to stay behind. He still thinks he's as young as his acolytes. Now run along and get ready. Dawn's less than an hour away." Pug nodded and hurried off, leaving Kulgan to regard the piles of books before him. With regret he picked the nearest one up and placed it on a nearby shelf. After a moment he grabbed another and stuffed it into a sack. "just one won't cause any harm," he said to the invisible specter of Tully shaking his head in disapproval. He put the rest of the books back on the shelf, save the last volume, which he shoved into the sack. "All right, then," he said defiantly, "two!"

sNOW WAS FALLING.

Pug shivered under his greatcloak, sitting astride his horse. He had been in the saddle for the last ten minutes, waiting as the rest of the Duke's company made ready. The courtyard filled with hurrying, shouting men, lashing supplies onto the balky mules of the baggage train. Dawn was just commencing, giving the courtyard a little color instead of the blacks and grey that had greeted Pug when he came from the tower. Porters had already carried his baggage down and were securing it among the other items being brought along. A panicked "Whoa!" erupted behind Pug, and he turned to see Tomas pulling frantically at the reins of a spirited bay, his head tossing high. Like Pug's own sleek, light war-horse, he was a far cry from the old draft animal they had ridden to the site of the shipwreck. "Don't pull so hard," Pug shouted. "You'll saw at his mouth and make him mad. Pull back gently and release a couple of times." Tomas did, and the horse quieted down, moving alongside Pug's own. Tomas sat as if the saddle had nails sticking through it. His face was a study in concentration as he tried to guess what the horse would do next. "If you hadn't been walking post yesterday, you could have gone riding, getting in some practice. Now I'll have to teach you as we go." Tomas looked thankful for the promise of aid. Pug smiled. "By the time we reach Bordon, you'll be riding like the King's Lancers." "And walking like a ruptured spinster." Tomas shifted in the saddle. "Already I feel like I've been sitting on a stone block for hours. After just a little way from the saddling post." Pug jumped down from his horse and looked over Tomas's saddle,

making Tomas move his leg so he could examine under the saddle flap, then asked, "Who saddled this horse for you?"

"Rulf. Why?"

"I thought so. He's paying you back for threatening him about that sword, or because we're friends. He doesn't dare threaten me anymore, now that I'm a Squire, but he thinks nothing of knotting your stirrup leathers. A couple of hours riding like this, and you'd be standing at meals for a month, if you didn't get pitched on your head and killed. Here, get down and I'll show you." -

Tomas dismounted, halfway between a leap and a fall. Pug showed him the knots. "They would have rubbed the inside of your thighs raw by the end of the day. And they're not long enough." Pug took out the knots and adjusted the leathers to the proper length. "It's going to feel very strange for a while, but you've got to keep your heels down. I'll remind you until you're sick of hearing it, but it'll keep you out of trouble when you do it without thought. And don't try to grip with your knees; that's wrong, and it'll make your legs so sore, you'll hardly be able to walk by tomorrow." He went on with a few basic instructions and inspected the cinch, which was loose. He tried tightening it, and the horse sucked air. Pug struck the gelding a blow in the side, and the animal exhaled sharply. Pug quickly pulled the cinch strap and said, "Sometime today, you most likely would have found yourself listing to one side, a most discomforting position." "That Rulf!" Tomas turned toward the stable. "I'll thrash him within an inch of death!" Pug grabbed his

friend's arm. "Wait. We don't have time for brawling." Tomas stood with fists clenched, then relaxed with a relieved sigh. "I'm in no condition for fighting, anyway." He turned to see Pug inspecting the horse. Pug shook his head, then winced. "Me too." He finished inspecting the saddle and bridle, and the horse shied. Pug gentled the horse. "Rulf's also given you a temperamental mount. This fellow would have probably thrown you before noon, and be halfway back to the stable before you hit the ground. With sore legs and shortened stirrup leathers, you never would have stood a chance. I'll trade with you." Tomas looked relieved and struggled into the saddle of the other horse. Pug readjusted the stirrups for both riders. "We can swap our travel rolls when we take our noon meal." Pug then soothed the high-strung war-horse and climbed nimbly into the saddle. Feeling surer hands at the reins, and a firm leg on either side, the gelding quieted. "Ho! Martin," shouted Tomas as the Duke's Huntmaster walked into view. "Are you traveling with us?" A wry grin split the face of the hunter, who was wearing his heavy green cloak over his forester's leathers. "For a short while, Tomas. I'm to lead some trackers around the boundaries of Crydee. I'll be heading due eastward when we come to the south branch of the river. Two of my trackers were on their way an hour ago, breaking trail for the Duke." "What do you think of this Tsurani business, Martin?" Pug asked. The still-youthful Huntmaster's face clouded. "If elves are given to worry, there is something to worry over." He turned toward the front of the assembling line. "Excuse me, I must instruct my men." He left the boys sitting alone. Pug asked Tomas, "How's your head this morning?" Tomas made a face. "About two sizes smaller than when I awoke." His face brightened a bit. "Still, the excitement seems to have stopped the banging inside. I feel almost good." Pug gazed at the keep. Memories of his encounter last night kept tugging at his mind, and suddenly he regretted the need to travel with the Duke. Tomas noticed his friend's pensive mood and said, "Why so glum? Aren't you excited about going?" "It's nothing. Just thinking." Tomas studied Pug for a moment. "I think I understand." With a

deep sigh, he sat back in the saddle, and his horse stamped and nickered. "I, for one, am glad to be leaving. I think Neala has tumbled to that little matter we spoke of yesterday." Pug laughed. "That will teach you to be mindful of who you escort into pantries." Tomas smiled sheepishly. The doors to the keep opened, and the Duke and Arutha came out, accompanied by Kulgan, Tully, Lyam, and Roland. Carline followed, with Lady Marna behind. The Duke and his companions made their

way to the head of the column, but Carline hurried down to where Pug and Tomas sat. As she passed, guardsmen saluted her, but she paid them no heed. She reached Pug's side, and when he bowed politely, she said, "Oh, get off that stupid horse." Pug climbed down, and Carline threw her arms around his neck, holding him closely for a moment. "Take care and stay well," she said. "Don't let anything happen to you." She pulled away, then kissed him briefly. "And come home." Holding back tears, she hurried to the head of the line, where her father and brother waited to say good-bye. Tomas let

out a theatrical whoop and laughed, while Pug remounted, the soldiers nearby attempted to restrain their own amusement. "It seems the Princess has made plans for you, m'lord," Tomas gibed. He ducked as Pug stirred to give him a backhanded cuff. The motion caused his horse to start forward, and suddenly Tomas was fighting to bring his horse back into line. The horse seemed determined to go in any direction except the one Tomas wished, now it was Pug's turn to laugh. He finally moved his own horse alongside Tomas's and herded the fractious mare back into line. She flattened her ears and turned to nip at Pug's horse, and the short boy said, "We both have accounts to settle with Rulf; he gave us two horses that don't like each other, too. We'll trade your mount off with one of the soldiers." With relief Tomas half dismounted, half fell to the ground, and Pug directed the exchange with a soldier down the line. The exchange was made, and as Tomas returned to his place, Roland came down to where they stood and offered them both his hand. "You two watch yourselves, now. There's plenty of trouble waiting out there without your looking for it." They acknowledged they would, and Roland said to Pug, "I'll keep an eye on things for you." Pug noticed his wry smile, glanced back to where Carline stood with her father, and said, "No doubt," then added, "Roland, whatever happens, good luck to you, too." Roland said, "Thank you. I'll take that as it's meant." To Tomas he said, "And things are certainly going to be dull without you around." Tomas said, "Given what's going on, dull would be welcome." Roland said, "As long as it's not too dull, right? Take good care! You're a bothersome pair, but I'd hate to lose you." Tomas laughed as Roland walked off with a friendly wave. Watching the Squire go up to the Duke's party, and seeing Carline standing next to her father, Pug turned to Tomas. "That decides it. I am glad to be going. I need a rest." Sergeant Gardan came riding back with orders to move the column, and they set off. The Duke and Arutha rode in the van, with Kulgan and Gardan behind. Martin Longbow and his trackers set off at a run beside the Duke's horse. Twenty pair of mounted guards followed, with Tomas and Pug nestled between them and the baggage train at the rear with its five pairs of guards. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, they moved through the gates of the castle and down the south road.

THEY HAD BEEN riding for three days, the last two through dense woodlands. Martin Longbow and his men had turned east that morning as they crossed the southern branch of the river Crydee, called river Boundary. It marked the border between Crydee and the Barony of Carse, one of Lord Borric's vassal provinces. The sudden snows of early winter had come and draped the autumn landscape in white. Many of the denizens of the forest had been caught unaware by the sudden winter, rabbits whose coats were still more brown than white, and ducks and geese who scampered across half-frozen ponds, resting as they migrated south. The snow fell in flurries of heavy wet flakes, melting slightly during the day, to refreeze at night, making a thin crust of ice. As the horses' and mules' hooves cracked through the ice, the crunching of leaves underneath could be heard in the still winter air. In the afternoon Kulgan observed a flight of firebrakes circling in the distance, barely visible through the

trees.

The colorful beasts, red, gold, green, and blue in color, raced over the treetops and dipped out of sight, then reappeared as they spiraled upward, with cries and small bursts of flame. Kulgan reined in as the train passed and waited for Pug and Tomas to overtake him. When they were alongside, he pointed out the display, saying, "It has the appearance of a mating flight. See, the more aggressively the males act, the more responsive the females. Oh, I wish we had time to study this more closely." Pug followed the creatures with his eyes as they rode through a clearing, then, somewhat startled, said, "Kulgan, isn't that Fantus there, hovering near the edge?" Kulgan's eyes widened. "By the gods! I think it is." Pug asked, "Shall I call him?" The magician chuckled. "Given the attention he's receiving from those females, I think it would do little good." They lost sight of the congregation of drakes as they rode after the Duke's train. Kulgan said, "Unlike most creatures, drakes mate at first snow. The females will lay eggs in nests, then sleep the winter, warming them with their bodies. In the spring the young hatch and are cared for by their mothers. Fantus will most likely spend the next few days . . . ahem, fathering a clutch of young. Then he'll be back at the keep, annoying Megar and the kitchen staff for the rest of the winter." Tomas and Pug laughed. Tomas's father made a great show of considering the playful drake a plague from the gods visited upon his well-ordered kitchen, but on several occasions both boys had spied Megar lavishing some of the choicest dinner scraps upon the beast. In the fifteen months since Pug had become Kulgan's apprentice, Fantus had become a winged, scaled house pet to most of the Duke's staff, though a few, like the Princess, found Fantus's dragonlike appearance disquieting. They continued to move east by south, as quickly as the terrain would permit.

The Duke was concerned about reaching the South Pass before the snows made it impassable, cutting them off from the east until spring. Kulgan's weather sense had allowed they had a fair chance of making it before any big storms struck. Soon they came to the edge of the deepest part of the great southern forests, the Green Heart. Deep within the glades, at prearranged locations, two troops of guards from the keep at Carse were waiting for them with fresh horses. Duke Borric had sent pigeons south with instructions for Baron Bellamy, who sent a reply the same way that horses would be waiting. The remounts and guards would be hurrying to the meeting places from the Jonril garrison, maintained by Bellamy and Tolburt of Tulan near the edge of the great forests. By changing mounts, the Duke would save three, perhaps four days of travel to Bordon. Longbow's trackers had left clear blazes for the Duke to follow, and they were due to reach the first meeting place later that day. Pug turned to Tomas. The taller boy was sitting his horse somewhat better, though he still flapped his arms like a chicken trying to fly when they were forced to a fast trot. Gardan came riding back down the line, to where the boys rode before the baggage guards. "Be wary," he shouted. "From here to the Grey Towers is the darkest part of the Green Heart. Even the elves pass through here quickly and in numbers." The sergeant of the Duke's Guard turned his horse and galloped back to the head of the line. They traveled the balance of the day, every eye searching the forest for signs



of trouble. Tomas and Pug made light conversation, with Tomas remarking on the chance of a good fight. Both boys' banter

sounded hollow to the soldiers around them, who sat silent and vigilant. They reached the place of meeting just before sundown. It was a clearing of considerable size, with several tree stumps grown over with ground cover that peeked through the snow, showing that the trees had been harvested long ago. The fresh horses stood in a picket, each tied to a long line, while six guards stood careful watch around them. When the Duke's party had ridden up, they had weapons ready. They lowered their weapons when they saw the familiar banner of Crydee. These were men of Carse, who wore the scarlet tabard of Baron Bellamy quartered by a gold cross, a golden griffin rampant over their hearts. The shield of each man bore the same device. The sergeant of the six guards saluted. "Well met, my lord."

Borric acknowledged the salute. "The horses?" he asked simply.

"They are fit, lord, and restless from waiting. As are the men." Borric dismounted, another soldier of Carse took his horse's reins. "Trouble?" "None, my lord, but this place is suited for other than honest men. All last night we stood watches by twos and felt the crawl of eyes upon us." The sergeant was a scarred veteran, who had fought goblins and bandits in his day. He was not the type to give in to flights of imagination, and the Duke acknowledged this. "Double the watch this night. You will escort the horses back to your garrison tomorrow. I would rather have them rested a day, but this is a poor place." Prince Arutha came forward. "I have also felt eyes upon us for the last few hours, Father." Borric turned to the sergeant. "It may be that we have been shadowed by a band of brigands, seeking to judge our mission. I will send two men back with you, for fifty men or forty-eight is of little difference, but eight is a far better number than six." If the sergeant felt any relief at this, he did not show it, simply saying, "I thank my lord."

Borric dismissed the man and with Arutha walked toward the center of the camp, where a large fire was burning. The soldiers were erecting rude shelters against the night wind, as they had each night of the journey. Borric saw two mules with the horses and noted that bales of hay had been brought along. Arutha followed his gaze. "Bellamy is a prudent man, he serves Your Grace well." Kulgan, Gardan, and the boys approached the two nobles, who stood warming themselves before the fire. Darkness was descending quickly; even at noon there was little light in the snow-shrouded forest. Borric looked around and shivered from more than the cold. "This is an ill-omened place. We will do well to be away as soon as possible."

They ate a quick meal and turned in. Pug and Tomas lay close, starting at every strange sound until fatigue lulled them to sleep.

the Duke's COMPANY passed deep into the forest, through glades so thick that often the trackers had had to change their course, doubling back to

find another way for the horses, marking the trail as they went. Much of this forest was dark and twisted, with choking underbrush that impeded travel

Pug said to Tomas, "I doubt the sun ever shines here." He spoke in soft tones. Tomas slowly nodded, his eyes watching the trees. Since leaving the men from Carse three days ago, they had felt more tension each passing day. The noises of the forest had lessened as they moved deeper into the trees, until they now rode in silence. It was as if the animals and birds themselves shunned this part of the forest. Pug knew it was only because there were few animals that hadn't migrated south or gone into hibernation, but that knowledge didn't lessen his and Tomas's dread. Tomas slowed down. "I feel something terrible is about to happen." Pug said, "You've been saying that for two days now." After a minute he added, "I hope we don't have to fight. I don't know how to use this sword, in spite of what you've tried to show me." "Here," said Tomas, holding something out. Pug took it and found a small pouch inside of which was a collection of small, smooth rocks and a sling. "I thought you might feel better with a sling. I brought one, too." They rode for another hour, then stopped to rest the horses and eat a cold meal. It was midmorning, and Gardan inspected each horse, ensuring it was fit. No soldier was given a chance to overlook the slightest possible injury or illness. Should a horse falter, its rider would have to double up with another, and those two would have to return as best they could, for the Duke could not wait for such a delay. This far from any safe haven, it was something no one wished to think about or discuss aloud. They were due to meet the second detachment of horses at mid-afternoon. The breakneck pace of the first four days had given way to a careful walk, for to rush through the trees would be dangerous. At the rate they were progressing, they would be on time. Still, the Duke was chafing at the slow pace. On and on they rode, at times having to stop while guards drew swords and cut at the brush before them, their sword blows echoing through the stillness of the forest as they followed the narrow path left by the trackers. Pug was lost in thoughts of Carline when, later, a shout erupted from the front of the column, out of sight of the boys. Suddenly the horse-men near Pug and Tomas were charging forward, oblivious to the thicket around them, dodging low-hanging branches by instinct.

Pug and Tomas spurred their horses after the others, and soon their senses recorded a blur of brown and white, as snow-spotted trees seemed to fly past. They stayed low, close to the necks of their mounts, avoiding most tree branches, while they struggled to stay aboard. Pug looked over his shoulder and saw Tomas falling behind. Branches and twigs caught at Pug's cloak as he crashed through the forest into a clearing. The sounds of battle assaulted his ears, and the boy saw fighting in progress. The remount horses were trying to pull up their stakes, while fighting exploded around them. Pug could only vaguely make out the form of combatants, dark shrouded shapes slashing upward with swords at the horsemen. A figure broke away and came running toward him, avoiding the blow of a guard a few yards ahead of Pug. The strange warrior grinned wick-edly at Pug, seeing only the boy before him. Raising his sword for a

blow, the fighter screamed and clawed at his face as blood ran between his fingers. Tomas had reined in behind Pug and with a yell let fly with another stone.

"I thought you'd get yourself into trouble," he shouted. He spurred his horse forward and rode over the fallen figure. Pug sat rooted for a moment, then spurred his own horse. Pulling out his sling, he let fly at a couple of targets, but couldn't be sure if the stones struck. Suddenly Pug was in a place of calm in the fighting. On all sides he could see figures in dark grey cloaks and leather armor pouring out from the forest. They looked like elves, save their hair was darker, and they shouted in a language unpleasant to Pug's ears. Arrows flew from the trees, emptying saddles of Crydee horsemen. Lying about were bodies of both attackers and soldiers. Pug saw the lifeless bodies of a dozen men of Carse, as well as Longbow's two lead trackers, tied to stakes in lifelike poses around the campfire. Scarlet bloodstains spotted the white snow beside them. The ruse had worked, for the Duke had ridden straight into the clearing, and now the trap was sprung. Lord Borric's voice rang out over the fray. "To me! To me! We are surrounded." Pug looked about for Tomas as he frantically kicked his mount toward the Duke and his gathering men. Arrows filled the air, and the screams of the dying echoed in the glade. Borric shouted, "This way!" and the survivors followed him. They crashed into the forest, riding over attack-ing bowmen. Shouts followed them while they galloped away from the ambush, keeping low over the necks of their mounts, avoiding arrows and low-hanging branches. Pug frantically pulled his horse aside, avoiding a large tree. He looked about, but could not see Tomas. Fixing his gaze upon the back of another horseman, Pug determined to concentrate on one thing only, not losing sight of the man's back. Strange loud cries could be heard from behind, and other voices answered from one side. Pug's mouth was dry and his hands sweating in the heavy gloves he wore. They sped through the forest, shouts and cries echoing around them. Pug lost track of the distance covered, but he thought it surely a mile or more. Still the voices shouted in the forest, calling to others the course of the Duke's flight. Suddenly Pug was crashing through the thick underbrush, forcing his lathered, panting horse up a small but steep rise. All around him was a gloom of grey and greens, broken only by patches of white. Atop the rise the Duke waited, his sword drawn, as others pulled up around him. Arutha sat by his father, his face covered with perspiration in spite of the cold. Panting horses and exhausted guards gathered around. Pug was relieved to see Tomas beside Kulgan and Gardan. When the last rider approached, Lord Borric said, "How many?"

Gardan surveyed the survivors and said, "We've lost eighteen men, have six wounded, and all the mules and baggage were taken." Borric nodded. "Rest the horses a moment. They'll come." Arutha said, "Are we to stand, Father?" Borric shook his head. "There are too many of them. At least a hundred struck the clearing." He spat. "We rode into that ambush like a rabbit into a snare." He glanced about. "We've lost nearly half our company." Pug asked a soldier sitting beside him, "Who were they?" The soldier looked at Pug. "The Brotherhood of the Dark Path,

Squire, may Ka-hooli visit every one of the bastards with piles," he answered, invoking the vengeance god. The soldier indicated a circle around them with his hand. "Small bands of them travel through the Green Heart, though they mostly live in the mountains east of here, and way up in the Northlands. That was more than I'd have bargained was around, curse the luck." Voices shouted from behind, and the Duke said, "They come. Ride!" The survivors wheeled and rode off, again racing through the trees ahead of their pursuers. Time became suspended for Pug as he negotiated the dangerous course through the dense forest. Twice men nearby screamed, whether from striking branches or from arrows Pug didn't know. Again they came to a clearing, and the Duke signaled a halt. Gardan said, "Your grace, the horses can't endure much more of this."

Borric struck his saddle horn in frustration, his face dark with anger. "Damn them! And where are we?" Pug looked about. He had no idea of where they stood in relationship to the original site of attack, and from the looks on the faces around him, no one else did either. Arutha said, "We must strike eastward, Father, and make for the mountains." Borric nodded. "But which way lies east?" The tall trees and overcast sky with its defused sunlight conspired to deny them any point of reference. Kulgan said, "One moment, your grace," and closed his eyes. Again shouts of pursuit echoed through the trees, as Kulgan opened his eyes and pointed. "That way. There lies the east." Without question or comment, the Duke spurred his horse in the indicated direction, motioning for the others to follow. Pug felt a strong urge to be near some-one familiar and tried to rejoin Tomas, but couldn't make his way through the press of riders. He swallowed hard and admitted to himself he was badly scared. The grim faces of the nearby soldiers told him he was not alone in that feeling. More time passed as they raced through the dark corridors of the Green Heart. Every advance along the escape route was accompanied by the echoing cries of Dark Brothers as they alerted others of the fugitives' route. Occasionally Pug would spy a shape loping along in the distance, quickly lost in the darkness of the trees as it ran a parallel course. The accompanying runners did not seek to hinder them, but always they were near. Once more the Duke ordered a halt. Turning to Gardan, he said,

"Skirmishers! Find out how close they follow. We must have rest." Gardan indicated three men, who quickly leapt from their horses and ran back along the route of their retreat. A single clash of steel and a strangled cry heralded their encounter with the closest Dark Brother tracker. "Damn them!" said the Duke. "They're herding us in a circle, seeking to bring us back into their main strength. Already we're moving more north than east." Pug took the opportunity to move next to Tomas. The horses were panting and shivering as perspiration steamed off them in the cold. Tomas managed a feeble smile, but said nothing. Men moved quickly among the horses, checking for injury. In a few minutes the skirmishers returned at a run. Panting, one said, "Lord, they are close behind, fifty, sixty at least." "How long?" The man stood with perspiration pouring down his face as he answered, "Five minutes, my lord." With grim humor he said, "The two we killed will make them pause, but no more

time than that."

Borric said to the company, "We rest a moment, then we ride."

Arutha said, "A moment or an hour, what does it matter? The horses are done. We should stand before more Brothers come to the call." Borric shook his head. "I must get through to Erland. He must know of the coming of the Tsurani." An arrow, quickly followed by a second, flew from the nearby trees, and another rider fell. Borric shouted, "Ride!" They cantered the exhausted horses deeper into the woods, then

slowed to a walk, while they kept watch for the coming attack. The Duke used hand signals to deploy the line of soldiers so they might swing to either flank and charge on command. Horses blew foam as their nostrils distended, and Pug knew they were close to dropping. "Why don't they attack?" whispered Tomas. "I don't know," answered Pug. "They just harry us from the sides and behind." -The Duke raised his hand and the column halted. No sounds of pursuit could be heard. He turned and spoke in a low tone. "They may have lost us. Pass the word to inspect your mounts-" An arrow sped past his head, missing him by inches. "Forward!" he shouted, and they began a ragged trot along the path they had been following. Gardan shouted, "My lord, it seems they wish us to keep moving." In a harsh whisper Borric swore, then asked, "Kulgan, which way lies east?" The magician closed his eyes again, and Pug knew he was tiring

himself with this particular spell. Not difficult if one was standing calmly, it had to be fatiguing him under these conditions. Kulgan's eyes opened and he pointed to the right. The column was heading northward. Arutha said, "Again they slowly turn us, Father, back into their main strength." Raising his voice, Borric said, "Only fools or children would keep to this route. On my command, wheel to the right and charge." He waited as every man readied weapons and made silent prayers to their gods that the horses could withstand one more gallop. Then the Duke shouted, "Now!" As a body, the column wheeled to the right, and riders spurred their flagging mounts. Arrows came pouring from the trees, and men and horses screamed. Pug ducked under a branch, desperately holding on to the reins while he fumbled with sword and shield. He felt the shield slipping and, as he struggled with it, sensed his horse slowing. He couldn't exercise the needed control over the animal and manage the weapons at the same time.

Pug reined in, risking a momentary stop to put his equipment right. A noise made him look to the right. Standing less than five yards away was a bowman of the Brotherhood of the Dark path. Pug stayed rooted for a moment, as did the bowman. Pug was struck by his resemblance to the Elf Prince, Calin. There was little to distinguish the two races, nearly the same in height and build, save hair and eyes. The creature's bowstring had snapped, and he stood with dark eyes fixed upon Pug while calmly setting about restringing his bow. Pug's astonishment at finding the Dark Brother standing so close to him momentarily caused him to forget the reason he had halted. He sat numbly watching the bowman repairing his weapon, entranced by the dark elf's coolly efficient manner. Then he

was pulling an arrow from his quiver in a fluid motion and fitting the shaft to the bowstring. Sudden alarm made Pug act. His staggering horse answered his frantic kicks and was off again. He didn't see the bowman's arrow, but heard and felt it speed past his ear, then he was back to a gallop, the bowman lost behind as Pug overtook the Duke's company. Noise from ahead made Pug urge his horse on, though the poor animal was giving every indication it was moving as fast as possible. Pug wove through the forest, the gloom making it difficult to negotiate. Abruptly he was behind a rider wearing the Duke's colors and then passing the man as Pug's horse proved fresher for carrying a lighter rider. The terrain became more hilly, and Pug wondered if they were entering the foothills of the Grey Towers. A horse's scream caused Pug to glance behind. He saw the soldier he had passed thrown as his mount collapsed, foaming blood spurting from the animal's nose. Pug and another rider halted, and the soldier turned back, riding over to where the first man stood. He extended his hand to offer the fallen man a double ride. The fallen soldier just shook his head, as he struck the standing horse on the rump, sending it ahead again. Pug knew the second man's horse could barely carry one rider, never two. The fallen rider pulled his sword and put down the injured horse, then turned to wait for the pursuing Dark Brothers. Pug found his eyes tearing as he contemplated the man's courage. The other soldier shouted something over his shoulder that was lost to the boy, then suddenly he was riding by. He shouted, "Move, Squire!" Pug put heels to the sides of his horse, and the animal picked up a staggering trot. The fleeing column continued on its stumbling, exhausted flight, Pug moving up through the company of riders to a place near the Duke. After a few minutes Lord Borric signaled for them to slow. They entered another clearing. Borric surveyed his company. A look of helpless rage crossed his face, to be replaced by surprise. He held his hand aloft, and the riders stopped their milling about. Shouts sounded in the forest, but from some distance away. Arutha, eyes wide with wonder, said, "Have we lost them?" Slowly the Duke nodded, his attention focused on the distant shouts.

"For the moment. when we broke through the archers, we must have slipped behind their pursuit. They'll discover that fact shortly and double back. We have ten, fifteen minutes at best." He looked over his ragged company. "If only we could find a place to hide." Kulgan moved his staggering horse alongside the Duke. "My lord, I might have a solution, though it is risky and might prove fatal."

Borric said, "No more fatal than waiting for them to come for us. What is your plan?"

"I have an amulet, which can control weather. I had planned to save it against possible storms at sea, for its use is limited. I may be able to mask our whereabouts with it. Let every man gather his horse at the far end of the clearing, near that outcropping of rock. Have them silence the animals."

Borric ordered it done, and the animals were moved to the opposite end of the clearing. Reassuring hands gentled exhausted and excited horses, quieting the mounts after their long flight. They had gathered at the highest end of a narrow clearing, their backs to an outcropping of granite that rose overhead like a grey fist. On three sides the ground sloped away gently. Kulgan began to walk along the perimeter of the

compact company. He chanted in a low voice, waving the amulet in an intricate pattern. Slowly the grey afternoon light faded, and a mist began to gather around him. At first only light wisps appeared nearby, then other, more substantial patches of moisture formed, becoming light fog. Soon the air between the Duke's company and the tree line grew

hazy. Kulgan moved more quickly and the fog deepened, filling the clearing with whiteness, moving outward from the magician into the trees on all sides. Within a few minutes it was impossible to see beyond a few yards. On and on paced Kulgan, sending thicker blankets of haze to obscure the already grey light in the trees. The clearing slowly became darker as the gloomy fog deepened with every incantation made by the magician. Then Kulgan stopped and turned to the Duke, whispering, "All must remain quiet. Should the dark elves wander blindly into the fog, the sloping terrain will, I hope, guide them past on one side or the other as they come around the rocks. But let no man move. Any sound will defeat us." Each man nodded, understanding the danger coming fast. They would stand in the center of this deep fog in the hope the Dark Brothers would walk past, putting the Duke and his men once more behind them. It was an all-or-nothing gambit, for should they win free, there was a good chance they would be far removed from this spot when the Brotherhood once more backtracked. Pug looked at Tomas and whispered, "It's a good thing it's rocky here, else we'd leave some pretty tracks." Tomas nodded, too frightened to speak. A nearby guard motioned for Pug to be silent, and the young Squire nodded. Gardan and several guards, with the Duke and Arutha, took up position near the front of the company, weapons ready should the ploy fail. Shouts grew louder as the Dark Brotherhood returned along their trail. Kulgan stood near the Duke, enchanting quietly, gathering more mist around him, then sending it forth. Pug knew the mist would be expanding rapidly, shrouding a continuously larger area as long as Kulgan continued to incant. Every extra minute would encompass more of the Green heart in fog, making it increasingly more difficult for the attack-ers to find them. Pug felt wetness on his cheek and looked up. Snow was beginning to fall. With apprehension he looked to the mist, to see if the newly arriving snow was affecting it. He watched a tense minute, then silently sighed with relief, for if anything, the snow was adding to the masking effects of the fog. A soft footfall could be heard nearby. Pug froze, as did every man near him. A voice rang out in the Brotherhood's strange language. Pug felt an itch between his shoulders, but refused to move, fighting to ignore the nagging sensation on his back. He glanced sideways at Tomas. Tomas stood stock-still, his hand on his horse's muzzle, looking like a statue in the haze. Like every other remaining horse, Tomas's mount knew the hand upon his face was a command for quiet. Another voice rang out in the mist, and Pug nearly jumped. It

sounded as if the caller were standing directly in front of him. Again the answering call came, sounding farther away. Gardan stood directly before Pug, who saw the sergeant's back twitch. Gardan slowly knelt, silently laying his sword and shield on the ground. He rose up, still moving slowly, pulling his belt knife. Then suddenly he stepped into the mist,

his movements as quick and fluid as a cat disappearing into the night. There was a faint sound, and Gardan reappeared.

Before him struggled the form of a Dark Brother, one of Gardan's huge black hands clamped tightly over the creature's mouth. The other arm was choking its throat. Pug could see the sergeant couldn't risk letting go for the brief instant needed to plunge the knife in its back. Gardan gritted his teeth in pain as the creature raked the sergeant's arm with clawlike nails. Its eyes bulged as it fought to breathe. Gardan stood rooted to the spot, holding the Dark Brother off the ground by main force as it struggled to get free. The creature's face turned red, then purple, as Gardan choked the life from it. Blood from the creature's raking nails flowed freely down Gardan's arm, but the powerful soldier barely moved at all. Then the Dark Brother went limp, and Gardan gave it a final, throat-crushing jerk of his arm and let the creature slide silently to the ground. Gardan's eyes were wide with exertion, and he panted quietly as he regained his breath. Slowly he turned, knelt, and replaced his knife. -Recovering his sword and shield, he stood, resuming his watch in the mist. Pug felt nothing but awe and admiration for the sergeant, but like the others he could only silently watch. Time passed, and the voices grew more faint as they sounded their angry inquiries to one another, seeking the fugitives' hiding place. The voices moved off, and then, like a long sigh of relief heaved by all in the clearing, it was silent. The Duke whispered, "They are past us. Lead the horses. We go east."

Puc looked ABOUT in the gloom. Ahead, Duke Borric and Prince Arutha led the way. Gardan stayed beside Kulgan, who was still exhausted from his magical undertaking. Tomas walked silently beside his friend. Of the fifty guardsmen who had set out with the Duke from Crydee, thirteen remained. Only six horses had survived the day. As they had faltered, the others had been quickly put down by silent, tight-lipped riders. They trudged upward, climbing higher into the foothills. The sun had set, but the Duke ordered them onward, fearful of the return of their pursuers. The men stepped cautiously forward, tentative in the rough terrain at night. The darkness was punctuated by softly uttered oaths as men lost their footing on the icy rocks time and again. Pug plodded along, his body numb with fatigue and cold. The day had seemed an eternity, and he could not remember when he had last stopped or eaten. Once he had been handed a waterskin by a soldier, but the lone drink was a dim memory. He grabbed a handful of snow and put it in his mouth, but the melting iciness gave him little relief.

The snow was falling more heavily, or at least it seemed so to Pug, he couldn't see it fall, but it struck his face with more frequency and force. It was bitterly cold, and he shivered inside his cloak. Like a booming call, the Duke's whisper sounded in the murk. "Stop. I doubt they are wandering about in the dark. We'll rest here." Arutha's whisper could be heard from somewhere ahead: "The falling snow should cover our tracks by morning." Pug dropped to his knees and pulled his cloak about himself. Tomas's voice sounded nearby. "Pug?" Softly he answered, "Here." Tomas dropped heavily beside him. "I think . . .," he said between panting breaths, "I'll never . . . move again." Pug could only nod. The Duke's voice came from a short distance away. "No fires." Gardan



answered, "It's a bitter night for a cold camp, Your Grace." Borric said, "Agreed, but if those sons of hell are nearby, a fire would bring them howling down upon us. Huddle together for warmth, so no one will freeze. Post guards and tell the others to sleep. When dawn breaks, I want to put as much distance between ourselves and them as possible." Pug felt bodies begin to press around him and didn't mind the discomfort for the warmth. Soon he drifted off into a fitful doze, starting awake often during the night. Then suddenly it was dawn.

ThREe MOre hoRsEs died during the night, their frozen bodies lying uncovered in the snow. Pug came to his feet, feeling light-headed and stiff.

He shivered uncontrollably as he stamped his feet, trying to stir some life into his chilled, aching body. Tomas stirred, then awoke with a start, looking to see what was occurring. He climbed awkwardly to his feet, then joined Pug in stamping feet and swinging arms.

"I've never been so cold in my life,"

he said through chattering teeth. Pug looked around. They were in a hollow between large outcroppings of granite, still bare and grey in patches, which rose up behind them thirty feet into the air, joining a ridge above. The ground sloped away along the path of their march, and Pug noticed the trees were thinner here. "Come along," he said to Tomas as he began to scramble up the rocks. "Damn!" sounded from behind, and Pug and Tomas looked back to see Gardan kneeling over the still form of a guard. The sergeant looked at the Duke and said, "Died in the night, Your Grace." He shook his head as he added, "He took a wound and never spoke of it."

Pug counted, besides himself, Tomas, Kulgan, the Duke, and his son, there were now just twelve soldiers. Tomas looked up at Pug, who had climbed ahead, and said, "Where are we going?" Pug noticed he whispered. He inclined his head upward and said, "To see what's over there." Tomas nodded, and they continued their climb. Stiff fingers protested against the need to grip hard rock, but soon Pug found himself warm again as exertion heated his body. He reached up and gripped the edge of the ridge above. He pulled himself up and over and waited for Tomas. Tomas came over the ridge, panting for breath, looked past Pug, and said, "Oh, glory!" Rising up majestically before them were the tall peaks of the Grey Towers. The sun rose behind, casting rose and golden highlights on the north faces of the mountains, while the western faces were still veiled in indigo darkness. The sky was clear, the snowfall over.

Everywhere they looked, the scenery was draped in white. Pug waved toward Gardan. The sergeant walked up to the base of the rocks, climbed a short way, and said, "What is it?" Pug said, "The Grey Towers! No more than five miles away." Gardan waved for the boys to return, and they scrambled down, falling the last few feet to land with a thump. With their destination in sight, they felt revived. They came to where Gardan stood in conference with the Duke, Arutha, and Kulgan. Borric spoke softly, his words carrying clearly in the crisp morning air. "Take whatever is left on the dead animals and divide it among the men. Bring the remaining horses, but no one rides. No use covering the animals, for we'll make broad tracks anyway." Gardan saluted and began circulating

among the soldiers. They stood about in pairs or singly, eyes watching for signs of possible pursuit. Borric said to Kulgan, "Have you an idea where the South Pass lies?" "I will try to use my magic sight, my lord." Kulgan concentrated, and Pug watched closely, for seeing with the mind's eye was another of the feats that had eluded him in his studies. It was akin to using the crystal, but less pictorial, more an impression of where something was in relation to the spellcaster. After a few minutes of silence, Kulgan said, "I cannot tell, Sire. If I had been there before, then perhaps, but I get no impression of where the pass may lie." Borric nodded. "I wish Longbow were here. He knows the landmarks of the area." He turned to the east, as if seeing the Grey Towers through the intervening ridge. "One mountain looks much like another to me." Arutha said, "Father, to the north?" Borric smiled a little at Arutha's logic. "Yes. If the pass lies northward, we still might chance across it before it is impassable. Once across the mountains, the weather will prove milder in the east—at least that is the rule this time of year. We should be able to walk to Bordon. If we are already north of the pass, then we will eventually reach the dwarves. They will shelter us and perhaps know another route to the east." He inspected his exhausted company. "With three horses and snow melted for drinking water, we should last another week." He looked around, studying the sky. "If the weather holds." Kulgan said, "We should be free of bad weather in two, perhaps three days. Farther into the future I cannot judge." A distant shout echoed over the trees, from deep within the forest below. Instantly everyone was still. Borric looked to Gardan. "Sergeant, how far away do you judge them?" Gardan listened. "It is hard to say, my lord. One mile, two, maybe more. Sound carries oddly in the forest, more so when it is this cold." Borric nodded. "Gather the men. We leave now."

Puc's FINGER TIPS BLEED through his torn gloves. At every opportunity during the day, the Duke had kept the men traveling over rock, to prevent Dark Brotherhood trackers from following. Every hour guards had been sent back to cut false trails over their own, pulling blankets taken from the dead horses behind, obscuring the tracks as best they could. They stood at the edge of a clearing, a circle of bare rock surrounded on all sides by scattered pines and aspens. The trees had grown progressively thinner as they moved up into the mountains, staying on the rougher, higher terrain rather than risk being followed. Since dawn they had moved northeast, following a ridge of rugged hills toward the Grey Towers, but to Pug's dismay the mountains seemed no closer. The sun stood high overhead, but Pug felt little of its warmth, for a cold wind blew down from the heights of the Grey Towers. Pug heard Kulgan's voice some distance behind. "As long as the wind is from the northeast, we'll have no snow, as any moisture will have fallen on the peaks. Should the wind shift and come from the west, or northwest, from off the Endless Sea, we'll have more snow." Pug panted as he scrambled along the rocks, balancing on the slippery surface. "Kulgan, must we have lessons, too?" Several men laughed, and momentarily the grim tension of the last two days lessened. They reached a large flat, before another upward rise, and the Duke ordered a halt. "Build a fire and slaughter an animal. We'll wait here for the last rear guard." Gardan quickly sent men to gather

wood in the trees, and one was given two of the horses to lead away. The high-strung mounts were footsore, tired, and unfed, and in spite of their training, Gardan wanted them removed from the smell of blood. The chosen horse screamed, then was suddenly silent, and when the fires were ready, the soldiers placed spits over the flames. Soon the aroma of roasting meat filled the air. In spite of his anticipated distaste, Pug found his mouth watering at the smell. In a while he was handed a stick, with a large piece of roasted liver on it, which he wolfed down. Nearby, Tomas was doing equal justice to a portion of sizzling haunch. When they were done eating, the still-hot meat left over was wrapped with strips from horse blankets and torn tabards, then divided among the men. Pug and Tomas sat by Kulkan as men broke camp, putting out fires, covering signs of passing, and readying for the resumption of the march. Gardan came to the Duke. "My lord, the rear guard is overdue."

Borric nodded. "I know. They should have returned a half-hour ago." He peered down the hillside, toward the huge forest, mist shrouded in the distance. "We'll wait five more minutes, then we will go."

They waited in silence, but the guards didn't return. Finally Gardan gave the order. "All right, lads. Off we go." The men formed up behind the Duke and Kulkan, and the boys fell in at the rear. Pug counted. There were only ten soldiers left.

Two dAYS LATER the howling winds came, icy knives ripping at exposed flesh. Cloaks were gathered around each figure tramping slowly northward, leaning into the wind. Rags had been torn and tied around boots in a feeble attempt to hold off frostbite. Pug tried vainly to keep his eyelashes free of ice, but the harsh wind made his eyes tear, and the drops quickly froze, blurring his vision. Pug heard Kulkan's voice above the wind. "My lord, a storm comes. We must find shelter or perish." The Duke nodded and waved two men ahead to seek shelter. The two set off at a stumbling run, moving only slightly faster than the others, but valiantly putting their remaining meager strength into the task. Clouds began to roll in from the northwest, and the skies darkened. "How much time, Kulkan?" shouted the Duke over the shrieking wind. The magician waved his hand above his head, as the wind blew his hair and beard back from his face, exposing his high forehead. "An hour at most." The Duke nodded again and exhorted his men to move along. A sad sound, a neighing cry, pierced the wind, and a soldier called out that the last horse was down. Borric stopped and with a curse ordered it slaughtered as quickly as possible. Soldiers butchered the animal, steaming hunks of meat being cut away, to chill in the snow where they were cast before they could be wrapped. When they were done, the meat was divided among the men. "If we can find shelter, we will build a fire and cook the meat," the Duke shouted. Silently Pug added that if they couldn't find shelter, they'd have little use for the meat. They resumed their march. A short time later the two guards returned with the news of a cave less than a quarter mile distant. The Duke ordered them to show the way. Snow began to fall, whipped by the driving wind. The sky was now dark, limiting visibility to only a few hundred feet. Pug felt

light-headed and had to struggle to pull his feet from the resisting snow. Both hands were numb, and he wondered if he was frostbitten. Tomas looked slightly better, being somewhat hardier by nature, but he also was too exhausted to speak. He just plodded along beside his friend. Suddenly Pug was lying face down in the snow feeling surprisingly warm and sleepy. Tomas knelt beside the fallen magician's apprentice. He shook Pug, and the nearly unconscious boy groaned. "Get up," Tomas shouted. "It's only a little way farther." Pug struggled upright, aided by Tomas and one of the soldier's. When he was standing, Tomas indicated to the soldier he could take care of his friend. The soldier nodded, but stayed near. Tomas loosened one of the many strips of blanket tied around him for warmth, knotted one end to Pug's belt, and half guided, half pulled the smaller boy along. The boys followed the guard who had helped them around an outcropping of rock and found themselves at the mouth of a cave. They staggered forward a few steps into the sheltering darkness, then fell to the stone floor. In contrast to the biting wind outside, the cave seemed warm, and they lapsed into an exhausted sleep.

Pug AWOKe to the smell of cooking horse meat. He roused himself and saw it was dark outside, beyond the fire. Piles of branches and deadwood were heaped nearby, and men were carefully feeding the fire. Others stood by, roasting pieces of meat. Pug flexed his fingers and found them painfully sore, but as he peeled off his tattered gloves, he saw no signs of frostbite. He nudged Tomas awake, and the other boy raised himself up on his elbows, blinking at the firelight. Gardan stood on the other side of the fire, speaking with a guard. The Duke sat nearby, in quiet conversation with his son and Kulkan. Beyond Gardan and the guard, Pug could see only blackness. He couldn't remember what time of day it had been when they found the cave, but he and Tomas must have slept for hours. Kulkan saw them stirring and came over. "How do you feel?" he asked, a look of concern on his face. The boys indicated they felt all right, considering the circumstances. Pug and Tomas doffed their boots at Kulkan's orders, and he was pleased to report they had suffered no frostbite, though one of the soldiers, he said, hadn't been as lucky. "How long were we asleep?" asked Pug. "Throughout last night and all this day," said the magician with a sigh.

Then Pug noticed signs that a lot of work had been done. Besides the brush being cut, he and Tomas had been covered by some of the blankets. A pair of snared rabbits hung near the cave mouth with a row of freshly filled waterskins stacked near the fire. "You could have woken us," Pug said, a note of worry in his voice.

Kulkan shook his head. "The Duke wouldn't have moved until the storm had passed, and that was only a few hours ago. In any event, you and Tomas weren't the only tired ones here. I doubt even the hearty sergeant there could have gone more than another few miles with only one night's rest. The Duke will see how things stand tomorrow. I expect we shall leave then, if the weather holds."

Kulkan stood and, with a small gesture indicating the boys should return to sleep if possible, went to stand beside the Duke. Pug was

surprised that, for someone who had slept the day around, he was again tired, though he thought he would fill his stomach before seeking more sleep. Tomas nodded at his unspoken question, and the two scooted over by the fire. One of the soldiers was busy cooking meat and handed them hot portions.

The boys wolfed down the food and after they were done sat back against one wall of the large cave. Pug started to speak to Tomas but was distracted when he caught sight of the guard by the cave's mouth. A queer look passed over the man's face as he stood talking to Sergeant Gardan, then his knees buckled. Gardan reached out to catch him, lowering him to the floor. The big sergeant's eyes widened as he saw the arrow protruding from the man's side.

Time seemed suspended for an instant, then Gardan shouted, "Attack!"

A howling cry sounded from outside the cave's mouth, and a figure came bounding into the light, jumping over the low brush, then again bounding over the fire, knocking down the soldier cooking meat. It landed a short way from the boys and spun to face those it had leapt past. It was wrapped in a coat and trousers of animal furs. On one arm it bore a battle-scarred buckler-size shield, and in the other a curved sword was held high.

Pug stayed motionless as the creature regarded the company in the cave, a snarl on inhuman lips, eyes glowing with reflected firelight and fangs bared. Tomas's training asserted itself, and the sword he had clung to over the long march was out of its scabbard in an instant. With a show the creature swung downward at Pug, who rolled sideways, avoiding the blow. The blade rang out as it struck the ground, and Tomas made an off-balance lunge, awkwardly taking the creature low in the chest. It fell to its knees and gurgled as blood filled its lungs, then fell forward.

Other attackers were leaping into the cave and were quickly engaged by the men from Crydee. Curses and oaths sounded, and swords rang out in the close confines of the cave.

Guards and attackers stood face-to-face, unable to move more than a few feet. Several of the Duke's men dropped swords and pulled daggers from their belts, better for close fighting.

Pug grabbed his sword and looked for an attacker, but found none. In the dancing light of the fire, he could see the attackers were outnumbered by the remaining guards, and as two or three men of Crydee grappled with each attacker, it was quickly down and killed.

Suddenly the cave was quiet, save for the heavy breathing of the soldiers. Pug looked and saw only one man down, the one who had taken the arrow. A few others sported light wounds. Kulgan hurried among the men, checking the wounds, then said to the Duke, "My lord, we have no other serious injuries."

Pug looked at the dead creatures. Six of them lay sprawled upon the cave floor. They were smaller than men, but not by much. Above thick browridges, their sloping foreheads were topped by thick black hair. Their blue-green tinged skins were smooth, save for one who had something

like a youth's beard upon his cheeks. Their eyes, open in death, were huge and round, with black irises on yellow. All died with snarls upon their hideous faces, showing long teeth that came close to being fangs.

Pug crossed to Gardan, peering into the gloom of the night for signs of more of the creatures. "What are they, Sergeant?"

"Goblins, Pug. Though I can't fathom what they are doing this far from their normal range."

The Duke came to stand next to him and said, "Only a half dozen, Gardan. I have never heard of goblins attacking armed men except when the advantage was theirs. This was suicide."

"My lord, look here," came Kulgan's call, as he knelt over the body of a goblin. He had pulled away the dirty fur jacket worn by the creature and pointed to a poorly bandaged long, jagged wound on its chest.

"This was not made by us. It is three, four days old and healing badly."

Guards inspected the other bodies and reported three others also bore recent wounds, not caused by this fight. One had a broken arm and had fought without a shield.

Gardan said, "Sire, they wear no armor. Only the weapons in their hands." He pointed to a dead goblin with a bow slung over its back, and an empty quiver at its belt. "They had but the one arrow they used to wound Daniel."

Arutha glanced at the carnage. "This was madness. Hopeless madness."

Kulgan said, "Yes, Highness; madness. They were battle weary, freezing, and starved. The smell of cooking meat must have driven them mad. From their appearance I'd say they've not eaten in some time. They preferred to gamble all on one last, frantic assault than to watch us eat while they froze to death."

Borric looked at the goblins again, then ordered his men to take the bodies outside the cave. To no one in particular, he said, "But who have they been fighting?"

Pug said, "The Brotherhood?"

Borric shook his head. "They are the Brotherhood's creatures, or when not allied against us, they leave one another alone. No, it was someone else."

Tomas looked around as he joined those by the entrance. He wasn't as comfortable speaking to the Duke as Pug, but finally he said, "My lord, the dwarves?"

Borric nodded. "If there's been a dwarven raid on a nearby goblin village, it would explain why they were unarmored and unprovisioned. They would have grabbed the nearest weapons and fought their way free, fleeing at first chance. Yes, perhaps it was the dwarves."

The guards who had carried the bodies off into the snow ran back into the cave. "Your Grace," one of them said, "we hear movement in the trees."

Borric turned to the others. "Get ready!"

Every man in the cave quickly readied his weapons. Soon all could hear the tread of feet crunching through the icy snow. It grew louder as they waited, getting closer. Pug stood tensely, holding his sword, pushing

down a churning feeling inside.

Suddenly the sounds of footfalls stopped, as those outside halted.

Then the sound of a single pair of boots could be heard coming closer.

Appearing out of the dark came a figure directly toward the cave. Pug craned his neck to see past the soldiers, and the Duke said, "Who passes this night?"

A short figure, no more than five feet tall, pulled back the hood of his cloak, revealing a metal helm sitting over a shock of thick brown hair.

Two sparkling green eyes reflected the firelight. Heavy brows of browned

hair came together at a point above a large hooked nose. The figure

stood regarding the party, then signaled behind. More figures appeared

from out of the night, and Pug pressed forward to get a better view,

Tomas at his side. At the rear they could see several of the arrivals

leading mules.

The Duke and soldiers visibly relaxed, and Tomas said, "They're dwarves!"

Several of the guards laughed, as did the closest dwarf. The dwarf

fixed Tomas with a wry gaze, saying, "What were you expecting, boy?"

Some pretty dryad come to fetch you away?"

The lead dwarf walked into the firelight. He stopped before the Duke

and said, "From your tabard, I see you to be men of Crydee." He struck

himself upon the chest and said, formally, "I am Dolgan, chief of

village Caldara, and Warleader of the Grey Towers dwarven people."

Pulling a pipe out of his cloak, from under a long beard that fell below

his belt, he filled his pipe as he looked at the others in the cave. Then

in less formal language he said, "Now, what in the name of the gods brings such a sorry-looking party of tall folk to this cold and forlorn place?"

MAC mOrBaIN CadIL

THE DWARVES STOOD GUARD.

Pug and the others from Crydee sat around the campfire as they

hungrily ate the meal prepared by Dolgan's men. A pot of stew bubbled

near the fire. Hot loaves of trail bread, thick hard crust broken to reveal

dark sweet dough thick with honey, were quickly being devoured.

Smoked fish, from the dwarves' pack animals, provided a welcome

change from the diet of horse meat of the last few days.

Pug looked from where he sat beside Tomas, who was hard at work

consuming his third portion of bread and stew. Pug watched as the

dwarves worked efficiently about the camp. Most were outside the

cave's mouth, for they seemed less inconvenienced by the cold than the

humans. Two tended the injured man, who would live, while two others

served the hot meal to the Duke's men, and another filled ale cups from

a large skin filled with the bubbling brown liquid.

There were forty dwarves with Dolgan. The dwarven chief was

flanked by his sons, Weylin, the older, and Udell. Both showed a striking

resemblance to their father, though Udell tended to darkness, having

black hair rather than red-brown. Both seemed quiet compared to their

father, who gestured expansively with a pipe in one hand and a cup of

ale in the other as he spoke with the Duke.

The dwarves had been on some sort of patrol along the edge of the

forest, though Pug gained the impression a patrol this far from their

villages was unusual. They had come across the tracks of the goblins who had attacked a few minutes before and were following closely behind, otherwise they would have missed the Duke's party as the night's storm obliterated all tracks of the men from Crydee's passage.

"I remember you, Lord Borric," said Dolgan, sipping at his ale cup, "though you were scarcely more than a baby when I was last at Crydee. I dined with your father. He set a fine table."

"And should you come again to Crydee, Dolgan, I hope you'll find my table equally satisfactory." They had spoken of the Duke's mission, and Dolgan had remained mostly silent during the preparation of the meal, lost in thought. Suddenly he regarded his pipe, which had gone out. He sighed forlornly, putting it away, until he noticed Kulgan had pulled out his own and was producing respectable clouds of smoke. Brightening visibly, he said, "Would you be having the requirement of an extra pipe upon you, master magician?" He spoke with the deep, rolling burr the dwarves made when speaking the King's Tongue. Kulgan fetched out his tabac pouch and handed it across to the dwarf. "Providentially," said Kulgan, "my pipe and pouch are two items always kept upon my person at all times. I can withstand the loss of my other goods-though the loss of my two books troubles me deeply-but to endure any circumstance without the comfort of my pipe is unthinkable. "

Aye," agreed the dwarf as he lit up his own, "you have the right of it there. Except for autumn's ale-and my loving wife's company or a good fight, of course-there's little to match the pipe for pure pleasure."

He drew forth a long pull and blew out a large cloud of smoke to emphasize his point. A thoughtful look crossed his rugged face, and he said, "Now to the matter of the news you carry. They are strange tidings, but explain away some mysteries we have been tussling with for some time now."

Borric said, "What mysteries?"

Dolgan pointed out of the cave mouth. "As we told you, we've had to patrol the area hereabouts. This is a new thing, for in years past the lands along the borders of our mines and farms have been free from trouble." He smiled. "Occasionally a band of especially bold bandits or' moredhel-the Dark Brothers you call them-or a more than usually stupid tribe of goblins troubles us for a time. But for the most part things remain pretty peaceful.

"But of late, everything's gone a-gley. About a month ago, or a bit more, we began to see signs of large movements of moredhel and goblins from their villages to the north of ours. We sent some lads to investigate. They found entire villages abandoned, both goblin and moredhel. Some were sacked, but others stood empty without sign of trouble.

"Needless to say, the displacement of those miscreants caused an increase in problems for us. Our villages are in the higher meadows and plateaus, so they dare not attack, but they do raid our herds in the lower valleys as they pass-which is why we now mount patrols down the mountainside. With the winter upon us, our herds are in our lowest meadows, and we must keep vigilant.

"Most likely your messengers didn't reach our villages because of the



large number of moredhel and goblins fleeing the mountains down into the forests. Now at least we've some gleaning of what's causing this migration."

The Duke nodded. "The Tsurani."

Dolgan was thoughtful for a moment, while Arutha said, "Then they're up there in strength."

Borric gave his son a questioning look, while Dolgan chuckled and said, "That's a bright lad you've got, Lord Borric." He nodded thoughtfully, then said, "Aye, Prince. They're up there, and in strength. Despite their other grievous faults, the moredhel are not without skill in warcraft."

He fell silent again, lost in thought for a few minutes. Then, tapping out the dottle of his pipe, he said, "The dwarven folk are not counted the finest warriors in the West for naught, but we lack the numbers to dispose of our more troublesome neighbors. To dislodge such a host as have been passing would require a great force of men, well armed and provisioned."

Kulgan said, "I would give anything to know how they reached these mountains."

"I would rather know how many there are," said the Duke.

Dolgan refilled his pipe and, after it was lit, stared thoughtfully into the fire. Weylin and Udell nodded at each other, and Weylin said, "Lord Borric, there may be as many as five thousand."

Before the startled Duke could respond, Dolgan came out of his reverie. Swearing an oath, he said, "Closer to ten thousand!" He turned to look at the Duke, whose expression showed he clearly didn't understand what was being said. Dolgan added, "We've given every reason for this migration save invasion. Plague, internal warfare between bands, pests in their crops causing famine, but an invading army of aliens was not one of them."

"From the number of towns empty, we guess a few thousand goblins and moredhel have descended into the Green Heart. Some of those villages are a clutch of huts my two boys could overcome unaided. But others are walled hill forts, with a hundred, two hundred warriors to man the palisade. They've swept away a dozen such in little over a month. How many men do you judge you'd need to accomplish such a deed, Lord Borric?"

For the first time in his memory, Pug saw fear clearly etched upon the Duke's face. Borric leaned forward, his arm resting across his knee, as he said, "I've fifteen hundred men in Crydee, counting those in the frontier garrisons along the boundary. I can call another eight hundred or a thousand each from the garrisons at Carse and Tulan, though to do so would strip them fully. The levies from the villages and towns number at best a thousand, and most would be old veterans from the siege at Carse or young boys without skills."

Arutha looked as grim as his father as he said, "Forty-five hundred at the outside, a full third unproved, against an army of ten thousand."

Udell looked at his father, then at Lord Borric. "My father makes no boast of our skills, nor of the moredhel's, Your Grace. Whether there be five thousand or ten thousand, they'll be hard, experienced fighters to drive out the enemies of our blood so quickly."

"Then I'm thinking," said Dolgan, "you'd best send word to your

elder son and your vassal barons, telling them to stay safely behind the walls of your castles, and hie yourself to Krondor. It will take all the Armies of the West to withstand these newcomers this spring."

Tomas suddenly said, "Is it really that bad?" then looked embarrassed for interrupting the council.

"I'm sorry, my lord."

Borric waved away the apology. "It may be we are weaving many threads of fear together into a larger tapestry than exists, but a good soldier prepares for the worst, Tomas. Dolgan is right. I must enlist the Prince's aid."

He looked at Dolgan. "But to call the Armies of the West to arms, I must reach Krondor."

Dolgan said, "The South Pass is closed, and your human ships' masters have too much sense to brave the Straits of Darkness in winter. But there is another way, though it is a difficult path. There are mines throughout these mountains, ancient tunnels under the Grey Towers. Many were carved by my people as we dug for iron and gold. Some are natural, fashioned when the mountains were born. And still others were here when my people first came to these mountains, dug by only the gods know whom. There is one mine that passes completely under the mountains, coming out on the other side of the range, only a day's march from the road to Bordon. It will take two days to pass through, and there may be dangers."

The dwarven brothers looked at their father, and Weylin said, "Father, the Mac Mordain Cadal?"

Dolgan nodded his head. "Aye, the abandoned mine of my grandfather, and his father before him." He said to the Duke, "We have dug many miles of tunnels under the mountain, and some connect with the ancient passages I have spoken of. There are dark and queer tales about Mac Mordain Cadal, for it is connected with these old passages. Not a few dwarves have ventured deep into the old mines, seeking legendary riches, and most have returned. But a few have vanished. Once upon a path, a dwarf can never lose his way back, so they were not lost in their searching. Something must have befallen them. I tell you this so there will be no misunderstandings, but if we keep to the passages dug by my ancestors, we should have small risk."

" 'We,' friend dwarf?" said the Duke.

Dolgan grinned. "Should I simply place your feet upon the path, you'd be hopelessly lost within an hour. No, I'd care not for traveling to Rillanon to explain to your King how I'd managed to lose one of his better Dukes. I will guide you willingly, Lord Borric, for a small price." He winked at Pug and Tomas as he spoke the last. "Say, a pouch of tabac and a fine dinner at Crydee."

The Duke's mood lightened a little. With a smile he said, "Done, and our thanks, Dolgan."

The dwarf turned to his sons. "Udell, you take half the company and one of the mules, and the Duke's men too ill or wounded to continue. Make for the castle at Crydee. There's an ink horn and quill, wrapped in parchment, somewhere in our baggage; find it for his lordship, so he may instruct his men. Weylin, take the others of our kin back to Caldara, then send word to the other villages before the winter blizzards

strike. Come spring, the dwarves of the Grey Towers go to war." Dolgan looked at Borric. "No one has ever conquered our highland villages, not in the longest memory of the dwarven folk. But it would prove an irritation for someone to try. The dwarves will stand with the Kingdom, Your Lordship. You have long been a friend to us, trading fairly and giving aid when asked. And we have never run from battle when we were called."

Arutha said, "And what of Stone Mountain?"

Dolgan laughed. "I thank His Highness for the jog to my memory. Old Harthorn and his clans would be sorely troubled should a good fight come and they were not invited. I'll send runners to Stone Mountain as well."

Pug and Tomas watched while the Duke wrote messages to Lyam and Fannon, then full stomachs and fatigue began to lull them, despite their long sleep. The dwarves gave them the loan of heavy cloaks, which they wrapped about pine boughs to make comfortable mattresses. Occasionally Pug would turn in the night, coming out of his deep sleep, and hear voices speaking low. More than once he heard the name Mac Mordain Cadal.

9

Mac Mordain Cadal

DoLcAN LED the Duke's party along the rocky foothills of the Grey Towers.

They had left at first light, the dwarven chieftain's sons departing for their own destinations with their men. Dolgan walked before the Duke and his son, followed by the puffing Kulgan and the boys. Five soldiers of Crydee, those still able to continue, under the supervision of Sergeant Gardan followed behind, leading two mules. Walking behind the struggling magician, Pug said, "Kulgan, ask for a rest. You're all done in."

The magician said, "No, boy, I'll be all right. Once into the mines, the pace will slow, and we should be there soon."

Tomas regarded the stocky figure of Dolgan, marching along at the head of the party, short legs striding along, setting a rugged pace.

"Doesn't he ever tire?"

Kulgan shook his head. "The dwarven folk are renowned for their strong constitutions. At the Battle of Carse Keep, when the castle was nearly taken by the Dark Brotherhood, the dwarves of Stone Mountain and the Grey Towers were on the march to aid the besieged. A messenger carried the news of the castle's imminent fall, and the dwarves ran for a day and a night and half a day again to fall on the Brotherhood from behind without any lessening of their fighting ability. The Brotherhood was broken, never again organizing under a single leader." He panted a bit. "There was no idle boasting in Dolgan's appraisal of the aid forthcoming from the dwarves, for they are undoubtedly the finest fighters in the West. While they have few numbers compared to men, only the hadati hillmen come close to their equal as mountain fighters."

Pug and Tomas looked with newfound respect upon the dwarf as he

strode along. While the pace was brisk, the meal of the night before and another this morning had restored the flagging energies of the boys, and they were not pushed to keep up.

They came to the mine entrance, overgrown with brush. The soldiers cleared it away, revealing a wide, low tunnel. Dolgan turned to the company. "You might have to duck a bit here and there, but many a mule has been led through here by dwarven miners. There should be ample room."

Pug smiled. The dwarves proved taller than tales had led him to expect, averaging about four and a half to five feet tall. Except for being short-legged and broad-shouldered, they looked much like other people. It was going to be a tight fit for the Duke and Gardan, but Pug was only a few inches taller than the dwarf, so he'd manage.

Gardan ordered torches lit, and when the party was ready, Dolgan led them into the mine. As they entered the gloom of the tunnel, the dwarf said, "Keep alert, for only the gods know what is living in these tunnels. We should not be troubled, but it is best to be cautious."

Pug entered and, as the gloom enveloped him, looked over his shoulder.

He saw Gardan outlined against the receding light. For a brief instant he thought of Carline, and Roland, then wondered how she could seem so far removed so quickly, or how indifferent he was to his rival's attentions. He shook his head, and his gaze returned to the dark tunnel ahead.

The TUNNELS were damp. Every once in a while they would pass a tunnel branching off to one side or the other. Pug peered down each as he passed, but they were quickly swallowed up in gloom. The torches sent flickering shadows dancing on the walls, expanding and contracting as they moved closer or farther from each other, or as the ceiling rose or fell. At several places they had to pull the mules' heads down, but for most of their passage there was ample room.

Pug heard Tomas, who walked in front of him, mutter, "I'd not want to stray down here; I've lost all sense of direction." Pug said nothing, for the mines had an oppressive feeling to him.

After some time they came to a large cavern with several tunnels leading out. The column halted, and the Duke ordered watches to be posted. Torches were wedged in the rocks and the mules watered. Pug and Tomas stood with the last watch, and Pug thought a hundred times that shapes moved just outside the fire's glow. Soon guards came to replace them, and the boys joined the others, who were eating. They were given dried meat and biscuits to eat. Tomas asked Dolgan, "What place is this?"

The dwarf puffed on his pipe. "It is a glory hole, laddie. When my people mined this area, we fashioned many such places. When great runs of iron, gold, silver, and other metals would come together, many tunnels would be joined. And as the metals were taken out, these caverns would be formed. There are natural ones down here as large, but the look of them is different. They have great spires of stone rising from the floor, and others hanging from the ceiling, unlike this one. You'll see one as we pass through."

Tomas looked above him. "How high does it go?"

Dolgan looked up. "I can't rightly say. Perhaps a hundred feet, perhaps two or three times as much. These mountains are rich with metals still, but when my grandfather's grandfather first mined here, the metal was rich beyond imagining. There are hundreds of tunnels throughout these mountains, with many levels upward and downward from here. Through that tunnel there"-he pointed to another on the same level as the floor of the glory hole-"lies a tunnel that will join with another tunnel, then yet another. Follow that one, and you'll end up in the Mac Bronin Alroth, another abandoned mine. Beyond that you could make your way to the Mac Owyn Dur, where several of my people would be inquiring how you managed entrance into their gold mine." He laughed. "Though I doubt you could find the way, unless you were dwarven born."

He puffed at his pipe, and the balance of the guards came over to eat. Dolgan said, "Well, we had best be on our way."

Tomas looked startled. "I thought we were stopping for the night."

"The sun is yet high in the sky, laddie. There's half the day left before we sleep."

"But I thought . . ."

"I know. It is easy to lose track of time down here, unless you have the knack of it."

They gathered together their gear and started off again. After more walking they entered a series of twisting, turning passages that seemed to slant down. Dolgan explained that the entrance on the east side of the mountains was several hundred feet lower than on the west, and they would be moving downward most of the journey.

Later they passed through another of the glory holes, smaller than the last, but still impressive for the number of tunnels leading from it.

Dolgan picked one with no hesitation and led them through.

Soon they could hear the sound of water, coming from ahead. Dolgan said, over his shoulder, "You'll soon see a sight that no man living and few dwarves have ever seen."

As they walked, the sound of rushing water became louder. They entered another cavern, this one natural and larger than the first by several times. The tunnel they had been walking in became a ledge, twenty feet wide, that ran along the right side of the cavern. They all peered over the edge and could see nothing but darkness stretching away below.

The path rounded a curve in the wall, and when they passed around it, they were greeted with a sight that made them all gasp. Across the cavern, a mighty waterfall spilled over a huge outcropping of stone. From fully three hundred feet above where they stood, it poured into the cavern, crashing down the stone face of the opposite wall to disappear into the darkness below. It filled the cavern with reverberations that made it impossible to hear it striking bottom, confounding any attempt to judge the fall's height. Throughout the cascade luminous colors danced, aglow with an inner light. Reds, golds, greens, blues, and yellows played among the white foam, falling along the wall, blazing with brief flashes of intense luminosity where the water struck the wall, painting a fairy picture in the darkness.

Dolgan shouted over the roar, "Ages ago the river Wynn-Ula ran from

the Grey Towers to the Bitter Sea. A great quake opened a fissure under the river, and now it falls into a mighty underground lake below. As it runs through the rocks, it picks up the minerals that give it its glowing colors." They stood quietly for a while, marveling at the sight of the falls of Mac Mordain Cadal.

The Duke signaled for the march to resume, and they moved on.

Besides the spectacle of the falls, they had been refreshed by spray and cool wind off them, for the caverns were dank and musty. Onward they went, deeper into the mines, past numberless tunnels and passages. After a time, Gardan asked the boys how they fared. Pug and Tomas both answered that they were fine, though tired.

Later they came to yet another cavern, and Dolgan said it was time to rest the night. More torches were lit, and the Duke said, "I hope we have enough brands to last the journey. They burn quickly."

Dolgan said, "Give me a few men, and I will fetch some old timbers for a fire. There are many lying about if you know where to find them without bringing the ceiling down upon your head."

Gardan and two other men followed the dwarf into a side tunnel, while the others unloaded the mules and staked them out. They were given water from the waterskins and a small portion of grain carried for the times when they could not graze.

Borric sat next to Kulgan. "I have had an ill feeling for the last few hours. Is it my imagining, or does something about this place bode evil?"

Kulgan nodded as Arutha joined them. "I have felt something also, but it comes and goes. It is nothing I can put a name to."

Arutha hunkered down and used his dagger to draw aimlessly in the dirt. "This place would give anyone a case of the jumping fits and starts. Perhaps we all feel the same thing: dread at being where men do not belong."

The Duke said, "I hope that is all it is. This would be a poor place to fight"-he paused-"or flee from." The boys stood watch, but could overhear the conversation, as could the other men, for no one else was speaking in the cavern and the sound carried well. Pug said in a hushed voice, "I will also be glad to be done with this mine."

Tomas grinned in the torchlight, his face set in an evil leer. "Afraid of the dark, little boy?"

Pug snorted. "No more than you, should you but admit it. Do you think you could find your way out?"

Tomas lost his smile. Further conversation was interrupted by the return of Dolgan and the others. They carried a good supply of broken timbers, used to shore up the passages in days gone by. A fire was quickly made from the old, dry wood, and soon the cavern was brightly lit.

The boys were relieved of guard duty and ate. As soon as they were done eating, they spread their cloaks. Pug found the hard dirt floor uncomfortable, but he was very tired, and sleep soon overtook him.

TheY LED the mules deeper into the mines, the animal's hooves clattering on the stone, the sound echoing down the dark tunnels. They

had walked the entire day, taking only a short rest to eat at noon. Now they were approaching the cavern where Dolgan said they were to spend their second night. Pug felt a strange sensation, as if remembering a cold chill. It had touched him several times over the last hour, and he was worried. Each time he had turned to look behind him. This time Gardan said, "I feel it too, boy, as if something is near."

They entered another large glory hole, and Dolgan stood with his hand upraised. All movement ceased as the dwarf listened for something.

Pug and Tomas strained to hear as well, but no sounds came to them. Finally the dwarf said, "For a time I thought I heard . . . but then I guess not. We will camp here." They had carried spare timber with them and used it to make a fire.

When Pug and Tomas left their watch, they found a subdued party around the fire. Dolgan was saying, "This part of Mac Mordain Cadal is closest to the deeper, ancient tunnels. The next cavern we come to will have several that lead directly to the old mines. Once past that cavern, we will have a speedy passage to the surface. We should be out of the mine by midday tomorrow."

Borric looked around. "This place may suit your nature, dwarf, but I will be glad to have it behind."

Dolgan laughed, the rich, hearty sound echoing off the cavern walls.

"It is not that the place suits my nature, Lord Borric, but rather that my nature suits the place. I can travel easily under the mountains, and my folk have ever been miners. But as to choice, I would rather spend my time in the high pastures of Caldara tending my herd, or sit in the long hall with my brethren, drinking ale and singing ballads."

Pug asked, "Do you spend much time singing ballads?"

Dolgan fixed him with a friendly smile, his eyes shining in the firelight.

"Aye. For winters are long and hard in the mountains. Once the herds are safely in winter pasture, there is little to do, so we sing our songs and drink autumn ale, and wait for spring. It is a good life."

Pug nodded. "I would like to see your village sometime, Dolgan."

Dolgan puffed on his ever-present pipe. "Perhaps you will someday, laddie."

They turned in for the night, and Pug drifted off to sleep. Once in the dead of night, when the fire had burned low, he awoke, feeling the chilling sensation that had plagued him earlier. He sat up, cold sweat dripping down his body, and looked around. He could see the guards who were on duty, standing near their torches. Around him he saw the forms of sleeping bodies. The feeling grew stronger for a moment, as if something dreadful was approaching, and he was about to wake Tomas when it passed, leaving him tired and wrung out. He lay back down and soon was lost in dreamless sleep.

HE AWOKE COLO and stiff. The guards were readying the mules, and soon they would all leave. Pug roused Tomas, who protested at being pulled from his dream. "I was in the kitchen at home, and Mother was preparing a large platter of sausages and corn cakes dripping with honey," he said sleepily.

Pug threw a biscuit at him. "This will have to do until Bordon. Then we shall eat."

They gathered together their meager provisions, loaded them on the mules, and set off. As they made their way along, Pug began to experience the icy feeling of the night before. Several times it came and went. Hours passed, and they came to the last great cave. Here Dolgan stopped them while he looked into the gloom. Pug could hear him saying, "For a moment I thought . . ."

Suddenly the hairs on Pug's neck stood up, and the feeling of icy terror swept over him, more horrible than before. "Dolgan, Lord Borric!" he cried. "Something terrible is happening!"

Dolgan stood stock-still, listening. A faint moan echoed from down another tunnel.

Kulgan shouted, "I feel something also."

Suddenly the sound repeated, closer, a chilling moan that echoed off the vaulted ceiling, making its origins uncertain.

"By the gods!" shouted the dwarf. "'Tis a wraith! Hurry! Form a circle, or it will be upon us and we'll be lost."

Gardan pushed the boys forward, and the guards moved the mules to the center of the cavern. They quickly staked the two mules down and formed a circle around the frantic animals. Weapons were drawn.

Gardan placed himself before the two boys, forcing them back near the mules. Both had swords out, but held them uncertainly. Tomas could feel his heart pound, and Pug was bathed in cold sweat. The terror that gripped him had not increased since Dolgan had put a name to it, but it had not lessened either.

They heard the sharp hiss of intaken breath and looked to the right.

Before the soldier who had made the sound, a figure loomed out of the darkness: a shifting man-shape, darker blackness against the black, with two glowing, red-coal lights where eyes should be.

Dolgan shouted, "Keep close, and guard your neighbor. You can't kill it, but they like not the feel of cold iron. Don't let it touch you, for it'll draw your life from your body. It is how they feed."

It approached them slowly, as if having no need to hurry. It stopped for a moment, as if inspecting the defense before it.

The wraith let out another low, long moan, sounding like all the terror and hopelessness of the world given voice. Suddenly one of the guards struck downward, slashing at the wraith. A shrill moan erupted from the creature when the sword hit, and cold blue fire danced along the blade for a moment. The creature shrank away, then with sudden speed struck out at the guard. An armlike shadow extended from its body, and the guard shrieked as he crumpled to the ground.

The mules broke, pulling up stakes, terrified by the presence of the wraith. Guards were knocked to the ground, and confusion reigned. Pug lost sight of the wraith for a moment, being more concerned with flying hooves. As the mules kicked, Pug found himself dodging through the melee. He heard Kulgan's voice behind him and saw the magician standing next to Prince Arutha. "Stand close, all of you," the magician commanded. Obeying, Pug closed to Kulgan with the others as the scream of another guard echoed through the gallery. Within a moment a great cloud of white smoke began to appear around them, issuing from Kulgan's body. "We must leave the mules," said the magician.

"The undead will not enter the smoke, but I cannot keep it together



long or walk far. We must escape now!"

Dolgan pointed to a tunnel, on the other side of the cavern from where they had entered. "That's the way we must go." Keeping close together, the group started toward the tunnel while a terrified bray sounded. Bodies lay on the floor: the two mules as well as the fallen guards. Dropped torches flickered, giving the scene a nightmarish quality, as the black shape closed upon the party. Reaching the edge of the smoke, it recoiled from its touch. It ranged about the edge, unable or unwilling to enter the white smoke.

Pug looked past the creature, and the pit of his stomach churned. Clearly standing in the light of a torch held in his hand was Tomas, behind the creature. Tomas looked helplessly past the wraith at Pug and the escaping party. "Tomas!" ripped from Pug's throat, followed by a sob.

The party halted for a brief second, and Dolgan said, "We can't stop. We'd all perish for the sake of the boy. We must press on." A firm hand clutched at Pug's shoulder as he started forward to aid his friend. He looked back and saw that it was Gardan holding him. "We must leave him, Pug," he said, a grim expression on his ebony face. "Tomas is a soldier. He understands." Pug was pulled along helplessly. He saw the wraith follow along for a moment, then stop and turn toward Tomas. Whether alerted by Pug's cries or by some evil sense, the undead creature started toward Tomas, slowly stalking him. The boy hesitated, then spun and ran to another tunnel. The wraith shrieked and started after him. Pug saw the glow of Tomas's torch disappear down the tunnel, then flicker into blackness.

ToMAs sAw the pained expression on Pug's face as Gardan pulled his friend away. When the mules had broken, he had dodged away from the others and now found himself separated from them. He looked for a way to circle around the wraith, but it was too close to the passage his companions were taking. As Kulgan and the others escaped up the tunnel, Tomas saw the wraith turn toward him. It started to approach, and he hesitated a moment, then ran toward a different tunnel.

Shadows and light danced madly on the walls as Tomas fled down the passage, his footfalls echoing in the gloom. His torch was held tightly in his left hand, the sword clutched in his right. He looked over his shoulder and saw the two glowing red eyes pursuing him, though they seemed not to be gaining. With grim determination he thought, if it catches me, it will catch the fastest runner in all of Crydee. He lengthened his strides into a long, easy lope, saving strength and wind. He knew that if he had to turn and face the creature, he would surely die. The initial fear lessened, and now he felt a cold clarity holding his mind, the cunning reason of a prey knowing it is hopeless to fight. All his energy was turned toward fleeing. He would try to lose the creature any way possible.

He ducked into a side corridor and hurried along it, checking to see if the wraith would follow. The glowing red eyes appeared at the entrance to the tunnel he had turned into, following him. The distance between them seemed to have increased. The thought that many might have died at the thing's hand because they were too frightened to run crossed

his mind. The wraith's strength lay in the numbing terror it caused. Another corridor and another turn. Still the wraith followed. Ahead lay a large cavern, and Tomas found himself entering the same hall in which the wraith had attacked the party. He had circled around and entered through another tunnel. Racing across the floor, he saw the bodies of mules and guards lying in his path. He paused long enough to grab a fresh torch, for his was nearly spent, and transferred the flame. He looked backward to see the undead creature closing on him and started off again. Hope briefly flickered in his breast, for if he could pick the proper corridor, he might catch up to the others. Dolgan had said that from this cavern it was a straight journey to the surface. He picked what he thought was the proper one, though he was disoriented and couldn't be sure.

The wraith let out a howl of rage at its prey's eluding it again, and followed. Tomas felt terror bordering on elation as his long legs stretched out, eating up the distance ahead of him. He gained his second wind and set a steady pace for himself. Never had he run so well, but then never had he possessed such a reason.

After what seemed an endless time of running, he found himself coming to a series of side tunnels, set closely together. He felt hope die, for this was not the straight path the dwarf had mentioned. Picking one at random, he turned into a passage and found more tunnels close by. Cutting through several more, he turned as quickly as possible, weaving his way through a maze of passages. Ducking around a wall formed between two such tunnels, he stopped briefly and caught his breath. He listened for a moment and heard only the sound of his pounding heart. He had been too busy to look behind and was unsure of the wraith's whereabouts.

Suddenly a shriek of rage echoed faintly down the corridors, sounding far off. Tomas sank to the floor of the tunnel and felt his body go limp. Another shriek echoed more faintly, and Tomas felt certain that the wraith had lost his trail and was moving off in another direction.

A sense of relief flooded through him, nearly causing him to laugh giddily. It was closely followed by the sudden realization of his situation.

He sat up and took stock. If he could find his way back to the dead animals, he would at least have food and water. But as he stood up, he realized that he had no notion which way the cavern lay. Cursing himself for not counting the turns as he had made them, he tried to remember the general pattern he had followed. He had turned mostly to the right, he reminded himself, so if he retraced his steps mostly to the left, he should be able to find one of the many tunnels that led to the glory hole. Looking cautiously around the first corner, Tomas set off, searching his way through the maze of passages.

AFTER AN UNKNOWN time had passed, Tomas stopped and looked around in the second large cavern he had come to since he had fled the wraith. Like the first, this cavern was devoid of mules and men-and the hoped-for food and water. Tomas opened his pouch and took out the small biscuit he had hoarded to nibble while walking. It gave him little relief from his hunger.

When he was done, he set off again, trying to find some clue to the

way out. He knew he had only a short time before his torch died, but he refused to simply sit and wait for a nameless death in the dark.

After some time Tomas could hear the sound of water echoing through the tunnel. Hurrying forward, his thirst spurring him on, he entered a large cavern, the biggest yet, as far as he could tell. Far away he could hear the faint roar of the Mac Mordain Cadal falls, but in which direction he couldn't be sure. Somewhere high in the darkness lay the path that they had taken two days earlier. Tomas felt his heart sink, he had moved deeper into the earth than he had thought.

The tunnel widened to a landing of some sort and disappeared beneath what appeared to be a large lake, constantly lapping against the sides of the cavern, filling it with muted echoes. Quickly he fell to his knees and drank. The water tasted rich with minerals, but was clear and fresh.

Sitting back on his haunches, he looked about. The landing was packed earth and sand and appeared to be fashioned rather than natural.

Tomas guessed the dwarves might have used boats to cross the underground lake, but could only wonder what lay on the other side.

Then the thought hit him that perhaps someone other than the dwarves had used boats to cross the lake, and he felt fear again.

To his left he spied a pile of wood, nestled against a junction of the landing and the cavern wall. Crossing to it, he pulled out several pieces and started a small fire. The wood was mostly timber pieces, used to shore up the tunnels, but mixed in were several branches and twigs.

They must have been brought down by the falls from above, where the river enters the mountain, he thought. Underneath the pile he found some fibrous weeds growing. Wondering at the plants' ability to grow without sunlight, the boy was nevertheless thankful, for after cutting them with his sword, he was able to fashion some rude torches with the weeds wrapped around some driftwood. He tied them in a bundle, using his sword belt, forcing him to give up his scabbard. At least, he thought, I'll have a little more light. Some extra time to see where he was going was comforting.

He threw some bigger timber pieces on his small fire, and soon it was roaring into brightness. Abruptly the cavern seemed to light up, and Tomas spun around. The entire cavern was glowing with sparkling light, as some sort of mineral, or crystal, caught the light and reflected it to be caught and reflected again. It was a glittering, sparkling rainbow of colors cascading over walls and ceiling, giving the entire cavern a fairylike quality as far as the eye could follow.

Tomas stood in awe for a minute, drinking in the sight, for he knew he would never be able to explain in words what he was seeing. The thought struck him that he might be the only human ever to have witnessed the display.

It was hard to tear his eyes from the glory of the vision, but Tomas forced himself. He used the extra illumination to examine the area he was in. There was nothing beyond the landing, but he did spy another tunnel off to the left, leaving the cavern at the far end of the sand.

He gathered together his torches and walked along the landing. As he reached the tunnel, his fire died down, the dry timber being quickly consumed. Another glorious vision assaulted his senses, for the gemlike

walls and ceiling continued to glimmer and glow. Again he stood silently watching the display. Slowly the sparkling dimmed, until the cavern was again dark, except for his torch and the quickly dying fire's red glow.

He had to stretch to reach the other tunnel, but made it without dropping his sword or torches, or getting his boots wet. Turning away from the cavern, he resumed his journey.

He made his way for hours, the torch burning lower. He lit one of the new ones and found that it gave a satisfactory light. He was still frightened, but felt good about keeping his head under these conditions and was sure Swordmaster Fannon would approve of his actions.

After walking for a while, he came to an intersection. He found the bones of a creature in the dust, its fate unknowable. He spotted the tracks of some other small creature leading away, but they were faint with age. With no other notion than the need for a clear path, Tomas followed them. Soon they also vanished in the dust.

He had no means to reckon time, but thought that it must be well into night by now. There was a timeless feeling to these passages, and he felt lost beyond recovery. Fighting down what he recognized as budding panic, he continued to walk. He kept his mind on pleasant memories of home, and dreams of the future. He would find a way out, and he would become a great hero in the coming war. And most cherished dream of all, he would journey to Elvandar and see the beautiful lady of the elves again.

He followed the tunnel downward. This area seemed different from the other caverns and tunnels, its manner of fashioning unlike the others.

He thought that Dolgan could tell if this was so, and who had done the work.

He entered another cavern and looked around. Some of the tunnels that entered the cavern were barely tall enough for a man to walk through upright. Others were broad enough for a company of men to walk through ten abreast, with long spears upon their shoulders. He hoped this meant the dwarves had fashioned the smaller tunnels and he could follow one upward, back to the surface.

Looking around, he spied a likely ledge to rest upon, within jumping distance. He crossed to it and tossed up his sword and the bundle of torches. He then gently tossed up his torch, so as not to put it out, and pulled himself up. It was large enough to sleep upon without rolling off. Four feet up the wall was a small hole, about three feet in diameter.

Looking down it, Tomas could see that it opened up quickly to a size large enough to stand in and stretched away into blackness.

Satisfied that nothing lurked immediately above him, and that anything coming from below would awaken him, Tomas pulled his cloak around him, rested his head on his hand, and put out the torch. He was frightened, but the exhaustion of the day lulled him quickly to sleep.

He lay in fitful dreams of red glowing eyes chasing him down endless black corridors, terror washing over him. He ran until he came to a green place where he could rest, feeling safe, under the gaze of a beautiful woman with red-gold hair and pale blue eyes.

He started awake to some nameless call. He had no idea of how long he had slept, but he felt as if it had been long enough for his body to

run again, if need be. He felt in the dark for his torch and took flint and steel from out of his pouch. He struck sparks into the wadding of the torch and started a glow. Quickly bringing the torch close, he blew the spark into flame. Looking about, he found the cavern unchanged. A faint echoing of his own movements was all he heard.

He realized he could have a chance of survival only if he kept moving and found a way up. He stood and was about to climb down from the ledge when a faint noise sounded from the hole above.

He peered down it but could see nothing. Again there came a faint sound, and Tomas strained to hear what it was. It was almost like the tread of footfalls, but he could not be sure. He nearly shouted, but held off, for there was no assurance it was his friends returned to find him. His imagination provided many other possibilities, all of them unpleasant.

He thought for a moment, then decided. whatever was making the noise might lead him out of the mines, even if only by providing a trail to follow. With no other option appearing more attractive, he pulled himself up through the small hole, entering the new tunnel.

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IT WAS A DISPIRITED GROUP THAT EMERGED FROM THE ruINE.

The survivors sank to the ground, near exhaustion. Pug had fought tears for hours after Tomas had fled, and now he lay on the wet ground staring upward at the grey sky, feeling numb. Kulgan had fared worst of all, being completely drained of energy by the spell used to repel the wraith. He had been carried on the shoulders of the others most of the way, and they showed the price of their burden. All fell into an exhausted sleep, except Dolgan, who lit a fire and stood watch.

Pug awoke to the sound of voices and a clear, starry night. The smell of food cooking greeted him. When Gardan and the three remaining guards awakened, Dolgan had left them to watch over the others and had snared a brace of rabbits. These were roasting over a fire. The others awoke, except Kulgan, who snored deeply.

Arutha and the Duke saw the boy wake, and the Prince came to where he sat. The younger son of the Duke, ignoring the snow, sat on the ground next to Pug, who had his cloak wrapped around him. "How do you feel, Pug?" Arutha asked, concern showing in his eyes.

This was the first time Pug had seen Arutha's gentler nature. Pug tried to speak and found tears coming to his eyes. Tomas had been his friend as long as he could remember, more a brother than a friend. As he tried to speak, great racking sobs broke from his throat, and he felt hot, salty tears run down into his mouth.

Arutha placed his arm around Pug, letting the boy cry on his shoulder.

When the initial flood of grief had passed, the Prince said, "There is nothing shameful in mourning the loss of a friend, Pug. My father and I share your pain."

Dolgan came to stand behind the Prince. "I also, Pug, for he was a likable lad. We all share your loss." The dwarf seemed to consider something

and spoke to the Duke.

Kulgan had just awakened, sitting up like a bear waking from winter's sleep. He regained his bearings and, seeing Arutha with Pug, quickly forgot his own aching joints and joined them.

There was little they could say, but Pug found comfort in their closeness.

He finally regained his composure and pulled away from the Prince. "Thank you, Your Highness," he said, sniffing. "I will be all right.",

They joined Dolgan, Gardan, and the Duke near the fire. Borric was shaking his head at something the dwarf had said. "I thank you for your bravery, Dolgan, but I can't allow it."

Dolgan puffed on his pipe, a friendly smile splitting his beard. "And how do you intend to stop me, Your Grace? Surely not by force?"

Borric shook his head. "No, of course not. But to go would be the sheerest folly."

Kulgan and Arutha exchanged questioning looks. Pug paid little attention, being lost in a cold, numb world. In spite of having just awakened, he felt ready for sleep again, welcoming its warm, soft relief.

Borric told them, "This mad dwarf means to return to the mines."

Before Kulgan and Arutha could voice a protest, Dolgan said, "I know it is only a slim hope, but if the boy has eluded the foul spirit, he'll be wandering lost and alone. There are tunnels down there that have never known the tread of a dwarf's foot, let alone a boy's. Once down a passage, I have no trouble making my way back, but Tomas has no such natural sense. If I can find his trail, I can find him. If he is to have any chance of escaping the mines, he'll be needing my guidance. I'll bring home the boy if he lives, on this you have the word of Dolgan Tagarson, chief of village Caldara. I could not rest in my long hall this winter if I did not try."

Pug was roused from his lethargy by the dwarf's words. "Do you think you can find him, Dolgan?"

"If any can, I can," he said. He leaned close to Pug. "Do not get your hopes too high, for it is unlikely that Tomas eluded the wraith. I would do you a disservice if I said otherwise, boy." Seeing the tears brimming in Pug's eyes again, he quickly added, "But if there is a way, I shall find it."

Pug nodded, seeking a middle path between desolation and renewed hope. He understood the admonition, but still could not give up the faint flicker of comfort Dolgan's undertaking would provide.

Dolgan crossed over to where his shield and ax lay and picked them up. "When the dawn comes, quickly follow the trail down the hills through the woodlands. While not the Green Heart, this place has menace aplenty for so small a band. If you lose your way, head due east. You'll find your way to the road to Bordon. From there it is a matter of three days' walk. May the gods protect you."

Borric nodded, and Kulgan walked over to where the dwarf made ready to leave. He handed Dolgan a pouch. "I can get more tabac in the town, friend dwarf. Please take this."

Dolgan took it and smiled at Kulgan. "Thank you, magician. I am in your debt."

Borric came to stand before the dwarf and place a hand on his shoulder.

"It is we who are in your debt, Dolgan. If you come to Crydee, we will have that meal you were promised. That, and more. May good fortune go with you."

"Thank you, Your Lordship. I'll look forward to it." Without another word, Dolgan walked into the blackness of Mac Mordain Cadal.

DoLcAN stoPPED by the dead mules, pausing only long enough to pick up food, water, and a lantern. The dwarf needed no light to make his way underground-his people had long ago adapted other senses for the darkness. But, he thought, it will increase the chances of finding Tomas if the boy can see the light, no matter the risk of attracting unwelcome attention. Assuming he is still alive, he added grimly.

Entering the tunnel where he had last seen Tomas, Dolgan searched about for signs of the boy's passing. The dust was thin, but here and there he could make out a slight disturbance, perhaps a footprint. Following, the dwarf came to even dustier passages, where the boy's footfalls were clearly marked. Hurrying, he followed them.

Dolgan came back to the same cavern, after a few minutes, and cursed.

He felt little hope of finding the boy's tracks again among all the disturbance caused by the fight with the wraith. Pausing briefly, he set out to examine each tunnel leading out of the cavern for signs. After an hour he found a single footprint heading away from the cavern, through a tunnel to the right of where he had entered the first time. Moving up it, he found several more prints, set wide apart, and decided the boy must have been running. Hurrying on, he saw more tracks, as the passage became dustier.

Dolgan came to the cavern on the lake and nearly lost the trail again, until he saw the tunnel near the edge of the landing. He slogged through the water, pulling himself up into the passage, and saw Tomas's tracks. His faint lantern light was insufficient to illuminate the crystals in the cavern. But even if it had, he would not have paused to admire the sight, so intent was he on finding the boy.

Downward he followed, never resting. He knew that Tomas had long before outdistanced the wraith. There were signs that most of his journey was at a slower pace: footprints in the dust showed he had been walking, and the cold campfire showed he had stopped. But there were other terrors besides the wraith down here, just as dreadful.

Dolgan again lost the trail in the last cavern, finding it only when he spied the ledge above where the tracks ended. He had difficulty climbing to it, but when he did, he saw the blackened spot where the boy had snuffed out his torch. Here Tomas must have rested. Dolgan looked around the empty cavern. The air did not move this deep below the mountains. Even the dwarf, who was used to such things, found this an unnerving place. He looked down at the black mark on the ledge. But how long did Tomas stay, and where did he go?

Dolgan saw the hole in the wall and, since no tracks led away from the ledge, decided that was the way Tomas must have gone. He climbed through and followed the passage until it came to a larger one, heading downward, into the bowels of the mountain.

Dolgan followed what seemed to be a group of tracks, as if a band of

men had come this way. Tomas's tracks were mixed in, and he was worried, for the boy could have been along this way before or after the others, or could have been with them. If the boy was held prisoner by someone, then Dolgan knew every moment was critical.

The tunnel wound downward and soon changed into a hall fashioned from great stone blocks fitted closely together and polished smooth. In all his years he had never seen its like. The passage leveled out, and Dolgan walked along quietly. The tracks had vanished, for the stone was hard and free of dust. High overhead, Dolgan could make out the first of several crystal chandeliers hung from the ceiling by chains. They could be lowered by means of a pulley, so the candles might be lit. The sound of his boots echoed hollowly off the high ceiling.

At the far end of the passage he spied large doors, fashioned from wood, with bands of iron and a great lock. They were ajar, and light could be seen coming through.

Without a sound, Dolgan crept close to the doors and peered in. He gaped at what he saw, his shield and ax coming up instinctively. Sitting on a pile of gold coins, and gems the size of a man's fist, was Tomas, eating what looked to be a fish. Opposite him crouched a figure that caused Dolgan to doubt his eyes.

A head the size of a small wagon rested on the floor. Shield-size scales of a deep golden color covered it, and the long, supple neck led back to a huge body extending into the gloom of the giant hall. Enormous wings were folded across its back, their drooping tips touching the floor. Two pointed ears sat atop its head, separated by a delicate-looking crest, flecked with silver. Its long muzzle was set in a wolflike grin, showing fangs as long as broadswords, and a long forked tongue flicked out for a moment.

Dolgan fought down the overwhelming and rare urge to run, for Tomas was sitting, and to all appearances sharing a meal, with the dwarven folk's most feared hereditary enemy: a great dragon. He stepped forward, and his boots clacked on the stone floor.

Tomas turned at the sound, and the dragon's great head came up. Giant ruby eyes regarded the small intruder. Tomas jumped to his feet, an expression of joy upon his face. "Dolgan!" He scrambled down from the pile of wealth and rushed to the dwarf.

The dragon's voice rumbled through the great hall, echoing like thunder through a valley. "Welcome, dwarf. Thy friend hath told me that thou wouldst not forsake him."

Tomas stood before the dwarf, asking a dozen questions, while Dolgan's senses reeled. Behind the boy, the Prince of all dragons sat quietly observing the exchange, and the dwarf was having trouble maintaining the equanimity that was normally his. Making little sense of Tomas's questions, Dolgan gently pushed him to one side to better see the dragon. "I came alone," he said softly to the boy. "The others were loath to leave the search to me, but they had to press on, so vital was the mission."

Tomas said, "I understand."

"What manner of wizardry is this?" asked Dolgan softly.

The dragon chuckled, and the room rumbled with the sound. "Come into my home, dwarf, and I will tell thee." The great dragon's head



returned to the floor, his eyes still resting above Dolgan's head. The dwarf approached slowly, shield and ax unconsciously at the ready. The dragon laughed, a deep, echoing sound, like water cascading down a canyon. "Stay thy hand, small warrior, I'll not harm thee or thy friend." Dolgan let his shield down and hung his ax on his belt. He looked around and saw that they were standing in a vast hall, fashioned out of the living rock of the mountain. On all its walls could be seen large tapestries and banners, faded and torn; something about their look set Dolgan's teeth on edge, for they were as alien as they were ancient—no creature he knew of, human, elf, or goblin fashioned those pennants. More of the giant crystal chandeliers hung from timbers across the ceiling. At the far end of the hall, a throne could be seen on a dais, and long tables with chairs for many diners stood before it. Upon the tables were flagons of crystal and plates of gold. And all was covered with the dust of ages.

Elsewhere in the hall lay piles of wealth: gold, gems, crowns, silver, rich armor, bolts of rare cloth, and carved chests of precious woods, fitted with inlaid enamels of great craft.

Dolgan sat upon a lifetime's riches of gold, absently moving it around to make as comfortable a seat as was possible. Tomas sat next to him as the dwarf pulled out his pipe. He didn't show it, but he felt the need to calm himself, and his pipe always soothed his nerves. He lit a taper from his lantern and struck it to his pipe. The dragon watched him, then said, "Canst thou now breathe fire and smoke, dwarf? Art thou the new dragon? Hath ever a dragon been so small?"

Dolgan shook his head. "'Tis but my pipe." He explained the use of tabac.

The dragon said, "This is a strange thing, but thine are a strange folk, in truth."

Dolgan cocked a brow at this but said nothing. "Tomas, how did you come to this place?"

Tomas seemed unmindful of the dragon, and Dolgan found this reassuring.

If the great beast had wished to harm them, he could have done so with little effort. Dragons were undisputedly the mightiest creatures on Midkemia. And this was the mightiest dragon Dolgan had heard of, half again the size of those he had fought in his youth.

Tomas finished the fish he had been eating and said, "I wandered for a long time and came to a place where I could sleep."

"Aye, I found it."

"I awoke at the sound of something and found tracks that led here."

"Those I saw also. I was afraid you had been taken."

"I wasn't. It was a party of goblins and a few Dark Brothers, coming to this place. They were very concerned about what was ahead and didn't pay attention to what was behind, so I could follow fairly close."

"That was a dangerous thing to do."

"I know, but I was desperate for a way out. I thought they might lead me to the surface, and I could wait while they went on ahead, then slip out. If I could get out of the mines, I could have headed north toward your village."

"A bold plan, Tomas," said Dolgan, an approving look in his eyes.

"They came to this place, and I followed."

"What happened to them?"

The dragon spoke. "I sent them far away, dwarf, for they were not company I would choose."

"Sent them away? How?"

The dragon raised his head a little, and Dolgan could see that his scales were faded and dull in places. The red eyes were filmed over slightly, and suddenly Dolgan knew the dragon was blind.

"The dragons have long had magic, though it is unlike any other. It is by my arts that I can see thee, dwarf, for the light hath long been denied me. I took the foul creatures and sent them far to the north. They do not know how they came to that place, nor remember this place."

Dolgan puffed on his pipe, thinking of what he was hearing. "In the tales of my people, there are legends of dragon magicians, though you are the first I have seen."

The dragon lowered his head to the floor slowly, as if tired. "For I am one of the last of the golden dragons, dwarf, and none of the lesser dragons have the art of sorcery. I have sworn never to take a life, but I would not have their kind invade my resting place."

Tomas spoke up. "Rhuagh has been kind to me, Dolgan. He let me stay until you found me, for he knew that someone was coming."

Dolgan looked at the dragon, wondering at his foretelling.

Tomas continued, "He gave me some smoked fish to eat, and a place to rest."

"Smoked fish?"

The dragon said, "The kobolds, those thou knowest as gnomes, worship me as a god and bring me offerings, fish caught in the deep lake and smoked, and treasure gleaned from deeper halls."

"Aye," said Dolgan, "gnomes have never been known for being overly bright."

The dragon chuckled. "True. The kobolds are shy and harm only those who trouble them in their deep tunnels. They are a simple folk, and it pleaseth them to have a god. As I am not able to hunt, it is an agreeable arrangement."

Dolgan considered his next question. "I mean no disrespect, Rhuagh, but it has ever been my experience with dragons that you have little love for others not your own kind. Why have you aided the boy?"

The dragon closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again to stare blankly toward the dwarf. "Know this, dwarf, that such was not always the way of it. Thy people are old, but mine are the oldest of all, save one. We were here before the elves and the moredhel. We served those whose names may not be spoken, and were a happy people."

"The Dragon Lords?"

"So your legends call them. They were our masters, and we were their servants, as were the elves and the moredhel. When they left this land, on a journey beyond imagining, we became the most powerful of the free people, in a time before the dwarves or men came to these lands. Ours was a dominion over the skies and all things, for we were mighty beyond any other.

"Ages ago, men and dwarves came to our mountains, and for a time we lived in peace. But ways change, and soon strife came. The elves drove the moredhel from the forest now called Elvandar, and men and dwarves warred with dragons.

"We were strong, but humans are like the trees of the forest, their numbers uncountable. Slowly my people fled to the south, and I am the last in these mountains. I have lived here for ages, for I would not forsake my home.

"By magic I could turn away those who sought this treasure, and kill those whose arts foiled my clouding of their minds. I sickened of the killing and vowed to take no more lives, even those as hateful as the moredhel. That is why I sent them far, and why I aided the boy, for he is undeserving of harm."

Dolgan studied the dragon. "I thank you, Rhuagh."

"Thy thanks are welcome, Dolgan of the Grey Towers. I am glad of thy coming also. It is only a little longer that I could shelter the boy, for I summoned Tomas to my side by magic arts, so he might sit my deathwatch."

"What?" exclaimed Tomas.

"It is given to dragons to know the hour of their death, Tomas, and mine is close. I am old, even by the measure of my people, and have led a full life. I am content for it to be so. It is our way."

Dolgan looked troubled. "Still, I find it strange to sit here hearing you speak of this."

"Why, dwarf? Is it not true with thine own people that when one dieth, it is accounted how well he lived, rather than how long?"

"You have the truth of that."

"Then why should it matter if the death hour is known or not? It is still the same. I have had all that one of my kind could hope for: health, mates, young, riches, and rest. These are all I have ever wanted, and I have had them."

"'Tis a wise thing to know what is wanted, and wiser still to know when 'tis achieved," said Dolgan.

"True. And still wiser to know when it is unachievable, for then striving is folly. It is the way of my people to sit the deathwatch, but there are none of my kind near enough to call. I would ask thee to wait for my passing before thy leaving. Wilt thou?"

Dolgan looked at Tomas, who bobbed his head in agreement. "Aye, dragon, we will, though it is not a thing to gladden our hearts."

The dragon closed his eyes, Tomas and Dolgan could see they were beginning to swell shut. "Thanks to thee, Dolgan, and to thee, Tomas."

The dragon lay there and spoke to them of his life, flying the skies of Midkemia, of far lands where tigers lived in cities, and mountains where eagles could speak. Tales of wonder and awe were told, long into the night.

When his voice began to falter, Rhuagh said, "Once a man came to this place, a magician of mighty arts. He could not be turned from this place by my magic, nor could I slay him. For three days we battled, his arts against mine, and when done, he had bested me. I thought he would slay me and carry off my riches, but instead he stayed, for his

only thought was to learn my magic, so that it would not be lost when I passed."

Tomas sat in wonder, for as little as he knew about magic from Pug, he thought this a marvelous thing. In his mind's eye he could see the titanic struggle and the great powers working.

"With him he had a strange creature, much like a goblin, though upright, and with features of finer aspect. For three years he stayed with me, while his servant came and went. He learned all I could teach, for I could deny him not. But he taught as well, and his wisdom gave me great comfort. It was because of him that I learned to respect life, no matter how mean of character, and vowed to spare any that came to me. He also had suffered at the hands of others, as I had in the wars with men, for much that I cherished was lost. This man had the art of healing the wounds of the heart and mind, and when he left, I felt the victor, not the vanquished." He paused and swallowed, and Tomas could see that speech was coming to him with more difficulty. "If a dragon could not have attended my deathwatch, I would as soon have him sit here, for he was the first of thy kind, boy, that I would count a friend."

"Who was he, Rhuagh?" Tomas asked.

"He was called Macros "

Dolgan looked thoughtful. "I've heard his name, a magician of most puissant arts. He is nearly a myth, having lived somewhere to the east."

"A myth he is not, Dolgan," said Rhuagh, thickly. "Still, it may be that he is dead, for he dwelt with me ages ago." The dragon paused.

"My time is now close, so I must finish. I would ask a boon of thee, dwarf." He moved his head slightly and said, "In yon box is a gift from the mage, to be used at this time. It is a rod fashioned of magic. Macros left it so that when I die no bones will be left for scavengers to pick over. Wilt thou bring it here?"

Dolgan went to the indicated chest. He opened it to discover a black metal rod lying upon a blue velvet cloth. He picked up the rod and found it surprisingly heavy for its size. He carried it over to the dragon. The dragon spoke, his words nearly unintelligible, for his tongue was swollen. "In a moment, touch the rod to me, Dolgan, for then will I end."

"Aye," said Dolgan, "though it will give me scant pleasure to see your end, dragon."

"Before that I have one last thing to tell. In a box next to the other is a gift for thee, dwarf. Thou mayest take whatever else here pleaseth thee, for I will have no use for any of it. But of all in this hall, that in the

box is what I wish thee to have." He tried to move his head toward Tomas, but could not. "Tomas, thanks to thee, for spending my last with me. In the box with the dwarf's gift is one for you. Take whatever else pleaseth thee, also, for thy heart is good." He drew a deep breath, and Tomas could hear it rattle in his throat. "Now, Dolgan."

Dolgan extended the rod and lightly touched the dragon on the head with it. At first nothing happened. Rhuagh said softly, "It was Macros's last gift."

Suddenly a soft golden light began to form around the dragon. A

faint humming could be heard, as if the walls of the hall reverberated with fey music. The sound increased as the light grew brighter and began to pulse with energy. Tomas and Dolgan watched as the discolored patches faded from Rhuagh's scales. His hide shone with golden sparkle, and the film started to lift from his eyes. He slowly raised his head, and they knew he could again see the hall around him. His crest stood erect, and his wings lifted, showing the rich silver sheen underneath. The yellowed teeth became brilliant white, and his faded black claws shone like polished ebony as he stood upright, lifting his head high.

Dolgan said softly, "'Tis the grandest sight I've ever beheld."

Slowly the light grew in intensity as Rhuagh returned to the image of his youthful power. He pulled himself to his full, impressive height, his crest dancing with silver lights. The dragon threw back his head, a youthful, vigorous motion, and with a shout of joy sent a powerful blast of flame up to the high vaulted ceiling. With a roar like a hundred trumpets he shouted, "I thank thee, Macros. It is a princely gift indeed."

Then the strangely harmonic thrumming changed in tone, becoming more insistent, louder. For a brief instant both Dolgan and Tomas thought a voice could be heard among the pulsing tones, a deep, hollow echo saying, "You are welcome, friend."

Tomas felt wetness on his face, and touched it. Tears of joy from the dragon's sheer beauty were running down his cheeks. The dragon's great golden wings unfolded, as if he were about to launch himself in flight. The shimmering light became so bright, Tomas and Dolgan could barely stand to look, though they could not pull their eyes from the spectacle. The sound in the room grew to a pitch so loud, dust fell from the ceiling upon their heads, and they could feel the floor shake. The dragon launched himself upward, wings extended, then vanished in a blinding flash of cold white light. Suddenly the room was as it had been and the sound was gone.

The emptiness in the cavern felt oppressive after the dragon vanished, and Tomas looked at the dwarf. "Let's leave, Dolgan. I have little wish to stay."

Dolgan looked thoughtful. "Aye, Tomas, I also have little desire to stay. Still, there is the matter of the dragon's gifts." He crossed over to the box the dragon had identified and opened it.

Dolgan's eyes became round as he reached in and pulled out a dwarven hammer. He held it out before himself and looked upon it with reverence. The head was made from a silver metal that shone in the lantern light with bluish highlights. Across the side were carved dwarven symbols. The haft was carved oak, with scrollwork running the length. It was polished, and the deep rich grain showed through the finish. Dolgan said, faintly, "'Tis the Hammer of Tholin. Long removed from my people. Its return will cause rejoicing in every dwarven long hall throughout the West. It is the symbol of our last king, lost ages ago."

Tomas came over to watch and saw something else in the box. He reached past Dolgan and pulled out a large bundle of white cloth. He unrolled it and found that the cloth was a tabard of white, with a golden dragon emblazoned on the front. Inside were a shield with the same

device and a golden helm. Most marvelous of all was a golden sword with a white hilt. Its scabbard was fashioned from a smooth white material like ivory, but stronger, like metal. Beneath the bundle lay a coat of golden chain mail, which he removed with an "Oh!" of wonder. Dolgan watched him and said, "Take them, boy. The dragon said it was your gift."

"They are much too fine for me, Dolgan. They belong to a prince or a king."

"I'm thinking the previous owner has scant use for them, laddie.

They were freely given, and you may do what you will, but I think that there is something special to them, or else they wouldn't have been placed in the box with the hammer. Tholin's hammer is a weapon of power, forged in the ancient hearths of the Mac Cadman Alair, the oldest mine in these mountains. In it rests magic unsurpassed in the history of the dwarves. It is likely the gilded armor and sword are also such. It may be there is a purpose in their coming to you."

Tomas thought for a moment, then quickly pulled off his great cloak. His tunic was no gambeson, but the golden mail went over it easily enough, being fashioned for someone of larger stature. He pulled the tabard over it and put the helm upon his head. Picking up the sword and shield, he stood before Dolgan. "Do I look foolish?"

The dwarf regarded him closely. "They are a bit large, but you'll grow into them, no doubt." He thought he saw something in the way the boy stood and held the sword in one hand and the shield in the other. "No, Tomas, you do not look foolish. Perhaps not at ease, but not foolish. They are grand, and you will come to wear them as they were meant to be worn, I think."

Tomas nodded, picked up his cloak, and turned toward the door, putting up his sword. The armor was surprisingly light, much lighter than what he had worn at Crydee. The boy said, "I don't feel like taking anything else, Dolgan. I suppose that sounds strange."

Dolgan walked over to him. "No, boy, for I also wish nothing of the dragon's riches." With a backward glance at the hall, he added, "Though there will be nights to come when I will wonder at the wisdom of that. I may return someday, but I doubt it. Now let us find a way home." They set off and soon were in tunnels Dolgan knew well, taking them to the surface.

DoLcAN GRIPPED ToMAs's arm in silent warning. The boy knew enough not to speak. He also felt the same alarm he had experienced just before the wraith had attacked the day before. But this time it was almost physically felt. The undead creature was near. Putting down the lantern, Tomas shuttered it. His eyes widened in sudden astonishment, for instead of the expected blackness, he saw faintly the figure of the dwarf moving slowly forward. Without thought he said, "Dolgan—"

The dwarf turned, and suddenly a black form loomed up at his back. "Behind you!" shouted Tomas.

Dolgan spun to confront the wraith, instinctively bringing up his shield and Tholin's hammer. The undead creature struck at the dwarf, and only Dolgan's battle-trained reflexes and dwarven ability to sense movement in the inky darkness saved him, for, he took the contact on

his iron-bosked shield. The creature howled in rage at the contact with iron. Then Dolgan lashed out with the legendary weapon of his ancestors, and the creature screamed as the hammer struck its form. Bluegreen light sprang about the head of the hammer, and the creature retreated, wailing in agony.

"Stay behind me," shouted Dolgan. "If iron irritates it, then Tholin's hammer pains it. I may be able to drive it off."

Tomas began to obey the dwarf, then found his right hand crossing to pull the golden sword free of the scabbard on his left hip. Suddenly the ill-fitting armor seemed to settle more comfortably around his shoulders, and the shield balanced upon his arm as if he had carried it for years.

Without volition of his own, Tomas moved behind Dolgan, then stepped past, bringing the golden sword to the ready.

The creature seemed to hesitate, then moved toward Tomas. Tomas raised his sword, readying to strike. With a sound of utter terror, the wraith turned and fled. Dolgan glanced at Tomas, and something he saw made him hesitate as Tomas seemed to come to an awareness of himself and put up his sword.

Dolgan returned to the lantern and said, "Why did you do that, lad?"

Tomas said, "I . . . don't know." Feeling suddenly self-conscious at having disobeyed the dwarf's instructions, he said, "But it worked. The thing fled."

"Aye, it worked," agreed Dolgan, removing the shutter from the lantern.

In the light he studied the boy.

Tomas said, "I think your ancestor's hammer was too much for it."

Dolgan said nothing, but he knew that wasn't the case. The creature had fled in fear from the sight of Tomas in his armor of white and gold. Then another thought struck the dwarf. "Boy, how did you know to warn me the creature was behind me?"

"I saw it."

Dolgan turned to look at Tomas with open astonishment. "You saw it? How? You had shuttered the lantern."

"I don't know how. I just did."

Dolgan closed the shutter on the lantern again and stood up. Moving a few feet away, he said, "Where am I now, lad?"

Without hesitation Tomas came to stand before him, placing a hand upon his shoulder. "Here."

"What-?" said the dwarf.

Tomas touched the helm, then the shield. "You said they were special."

"Aye, lad. But I didn't think they were that special."

"Should I take them off?" asked the worried boy.

"No, no." Leaving the lantern upon the floor, Dolgan said, "We can move more quickly if I don't have to worry about what you can and can't see." He forced a note of cheeriness into his voice. "And despite there being no two finer warriors in the land, it's best if we don't announce our presence with that light. The dragon's telling of the moredhel being down in our mines gives me no comfort. If one band was brave enough to risk my people's wrath, there may be others. Yon wraith may be terrified of your golden sword and my ancient hammer, but twenty or

so moredhel might not be so easily impressed."  
Tomas could find nothing to say, so they started moving off into the darkness.

thReE TIMEs they stopped and hid while hurrying groups of goblins and Dark Brothers passed near by. From their dark vantage point they could see that many of those who passed harbored wounds or were aided by their kinsmen as they limped along. After the last group was gone, Dolgan turned to Tomas and said, "Never in history have the goblins and moredhel dared to enter our mines in such numbers. Too much do they fear my people to risk it."

Tomas said, "They look pretty beat up, Dolgan, and they have females and young with them, and carry great bundles, too. They are fleeing something."

The dwarf nodded. "They are all moving from the direction of the northern valley in the Grey Towers, heading toward the Green Heart. Something still drives them south."

"The Tsurani?"

Dolgan nodded. "My thought also. Come. We had best return to Caldara as quickly as we can." They set off and soon were in tunnels Dolgan knew well, taking them to the surface and home.

TheY WERE Both exhausted when they reached Caldara five days later. The snows in the mountains were heavy, and the going was slow. As they approached the village, they were sighted by guards, and soon the entire village turned out to greet them.

They were taken to the village long hall, and Tomas was given a room. He was so tired that he fell asleep at once, and even the stout dwarf was fatigued. The dwarves agreed to call the village elders together the next day in council and discuss the latest news to reach the valley.

Tomas awoke feeling ravenous. He stretched as he stood up and was surprised to find no stiffness. He had fallen asleep in the golden mail and should have wakened to protesting joints and muscles. Instead he felt rested and well. He opened the door and stepped into a hall. He saw no one until he came to the central room of the long hall. There were several dwarves seated along the great table, with Dolgan at the head. Tomas saw one was Weylin, Dolgan's son. Dolgan motioned the boy to a chair and introduced him to the company.

The dwarves all greeted Tomas, who made polite responses. Mostly he stared at the great feast of food on the table.

Dolgan laughed and said, "Help yourself, laddie, there is little cause for you to be hungry with the board full." Tomas heaped a plate with beef, cheese, and bread and took a flagon of ale, though he had little head for it and it was early in the day. He quickly consumed what was on the platter and helped himself to another portion, looking to see if anyone disapproved. Most of the dwarves were involved in a complicated discussion of an unknown nature to Tomas, having to do with the allocation of winter stores to various villages in the area.

Dolgan called a halt to the discussion and said, "Now that Tomas is with us, I think we had best speak of these Tsurani."

Tomas's ears pricked up at that, and he turned his attention fully to



what was being said. Dolgan continued, "Since I left on patrol, we have had runners from Elvandar and Stone Mountain. There have been many sightings of these aliens near the North Pass. They have made camp in the hills south of Stone Mountain."

One of the dwarves said, "That is Stone Mountain's business, unless they call us to arms."

Dolgan said, "True, Orwin, but there is also the news they have been seen moving in and out of the valley just south of the pass. They have intruded on lands traditionally ours, and that is the business of the Grey Towers."

The dwarf addressed as Orwin nodded. "Indeed it is, but there is

naught we can do until spring."

Dolgan put his feet up on the table, lighting a pipe. "And that is true also. But we can be thankful the Tsurani can do naught until spring, as well."

Tomas put down a joint of beef he was holding. "Has the blizzard struck?"

Dolgan looked at him. "Aye, laddie, the passes are all solid with snow, for the first winter blizzard came upon us last night. There will be nothing that can move out there, least of all an army."

Tomas looked at Dolgan. "Then . . ."

"Aye. You'll guest with us this winter, for not even our hardiest runner could make his way out of these mountains to Crydee."

Tomas sat back, for in spite of the comforts of the dwarven long hall, he wished for more familiar surroundings. Still, there was nothing that could be done. He resigned himself to that and returned his attention to his meal.

11

SOrcerer's Isle

thE WEARY GROUP TRUDGED INTO BoRDON.

Around them rode a company of Natalese Rangers, dressed in their traditional grey tunics, trousers, and cloaks. They had been on patrol, had encountered the travelers a mile out of town, and were now escorting them. Borric was irritated that the rangers had not offered to let the exhausted travelers ride double, but he hid it well. They had little reason to recognize this group of ragamuffins as the Duke of Crydee and his party, and even if he should have arrived in state, there was little warmth between the Free Cities of Natal and the Kingdom.

Pug looked at Bordon with wonder. It was a small city by Kingdom standards, little more than a seaport town, but far larger than Crydee. Everywhere he looked, people were hurrying about on unknown tasks, busy and preoccupied. Little attention was paid the travelers except for an occasional glance from a shopkeeper or a woman at market. Never had the boy seen so many people, horses, mules, and wagons all in one place. It was a confusion of colors and sounds, overwhelming his senses. Barking dogs ran behind the rangers' horses, nimbly avoiding kicks by the irritated mounts. A few street boys shouted obscenities at the party,

all obviously outlanders from their look, and most likely prisoners from the escort. Pug was vaguely troubled by this rudeness, but his attention was quickly distracted by the newness of the city.

Bordon, like the other cities in the area, had no standing army, but instead supported a garrison of Natalese Rangers, descendants of the legendary Imperial Keshian Guides and counted among the best horse soldiers and trackers in the west. They could provide ample warning of approaching trouble and allow the local militia time to turn out. Nominally independent, the rangers were free to dispose of outlaws and renegades on the spot, but after hearing the Duke's story, and at mention of the name Martin Longbow-whom they knew well-the leader of the patrol decided this matter should be turned over to the local prefects. They were taken to the office of the local prefect, located in a small building near the city square. The rangers appeared pleased to be shed of the prisoners and return to their patrol as they gave over custody to the prefect.

The prefect was a short, swarthy man given to brightly colored sashes about his ample girth and large golden rings upon his fingers. He smoothed his dark, oiled beard as the ranger captain explained his company's meeting with the Duke's party. As the rangers rode off, the prefect greeted Borric coolly. When the Duke made it clear they were expected by Talbott Kilrane, the largest ships' broker in the city and Borric's trading agent in the Free Cities, the prefect's manner changed abruptly. They were taken from the office to the prefect's private quarters and offered hot, dark coffee. The prefect sent one of his servants with a message to the house of Kilrane and waited quietly, only occasionally making noncommittal small talk with the Duke.

Kulgan leaned over to Pug and said, "Our host is the sort who sees which way the wind blows before making up his mind, he waits word from the merchant before deciding if we're prisoners or guests." The magician chuckled. "You'll find as you grow older that minor functionaries are the same the world over."

An angry storm in the person of Meecham appeared suddenly in the door of the prefect's home a short time later, one of Kilrane's senior clerks at his elbow. The clerk quickly made it clear that this was indeed the Duke of Crydee and, yes, he was expected by Talbott Kilrane. The prefect was abjectly apologetic and hopeful the Duke would forgive the inconvenience, but under the present conditions, in these troubled times, he could understand? His manner was fawning and his smile unctuous.

Borric indicated that, yes, he did understand, all too well. Without any further delay, they left the prefect and went outside, where a group of grooms waited with horses. Quickly they mounted up, and Meecham and the clerk led them through the town, toward a hillside community of large, imposing houses.

The house of Talbott Kilrane stood topmost upon the highest hill overlooking the city. From the road Pug could see ships standing at anchor. Dozens of them were sitting with masts removed, obviously out of service during the harsh weather. A few coast-huggers bound for Ylith in the north or the other Free Cities were making their way cautiously in and out of the harbor, but for the most part the harbor was quiet.

They reached the house and entered an open gate in a low wall, where servants ran to take their horses. As they dismounted, their host came through the large entrance to the house.

"Welcome, Lord Borric, welcome," he said, a warm smile splitting his gaunt face. Talbott Kilrane looked like a vulture reincarnated into human form, with a balding head, sharp features, and small, dark eyes. His expensive robes did little to hide his gauntness, but there was an ease to his manner, and a concern in his eyes, that softened the unattractive aspect.

In spite of the man's appearance, Pug found him likable. He shoosed servants off, to make ready rooms and hot meals for the party. He would not listen as the Duke tried to explain the mission. Raising a hand, he said, "Later, Your Grace. We can speak at length, after you have had rest and food. I will expect you for dinner tonight, but for now there are hot baths and clean beds for your party. I will have warm meals delivered to your quarters. Good food, rest, and clean clothes, and you'll feel like a new man. Then we can speak."

He clapped his hands, and a housecarl came to show them their rooms. The Duke and his son were given separate quarters, while Pug and Kulgan shared another. Gardan was shown to Meecham's room, and the Duke's soldiers were taken to the servants' quarters.

Kulgan told Pug to take the first bath while the magician spoke with his servant for a while. Meecham and Kulgan went off to the franklin's room, and Pug stripped off his dirty clothes. In the center of the room was a large metal tub, filled with scented water, hot and steaming. He stepped into it and pulled his foot out quickly. After three days of walking through snow, the water felt as if it were boiling. Gently he placed his foot back in and, when he had become used to the heat, slowly entered the water.

He sat back in the tub, the sloping back providing support. The inside of the tub was enameled, and Pug found the slick, smooth feeling strange after the wooden tubs of home. He lathered himself over with a sweet soap and washed the dirt from his hair, then stood in the tub and poured a bucket of cold water over his head to rinse off.

He dried himself and put on the clean nightshirt that had been left for him. In spite of the early hour he fell into the warm bed. His last thought was of the sandy-haired boy with the ready grin. As Pug slipped into sleep, he wondered if Dolgan had found his friend.

He awoke once during the day, hearing a nameless tune being hummed, while water was being splashed about with great zeal as Kulgan soaped his large body. Pug closed his eyes and was quickly asleep again.

He was hard asleep when Kulgan roused him for dinner. His tunic and trousers had been cleaned and a small rent in the shirt mended. His boots were polished and shone with a black gleam. As he stood inspecting himself in a mirror, he noticed for the first time a soft black shadow on his cheeks. He leaned closer and saw the early signs of a beard. Kulgan watched him and said, "Well, Pug. Shall I have them fetch you a razor so you can keep your chin bare like Prince Arutha? Or do you wish to cultivate a magnificent beard?" He exaggeratedly brushed his own grey beard.

Pug smiled for the first time since leaving Mac Mordain Cadal. "I think I can leave off worrying about it for a time."

Kulgan laughed, glad to see the boy's spirits returning. The magician had been troubled at the depth of Pug's mourning for Tomas and was relieved to see the boy's resilient nature assert itself. Kulgan held the door open. "Shall we?"

Pug inclined his head, imitating a courtly bow, and said, "Certes, master magician. After you?" and broke into a laugh.

They made their way to the dining room, a large and well-lit hall, though nothing as large as in the castle of Crydee. The Duke and Prince Arutha were already seated, and Kulgan and Pug quickly took their places at the table.

Borric was just finishing his account of the events at Crydee and in the great forest when Pug and Kulgan sat. "So," he said, "I chose to carry this news myself, so important I believe it to be."

The merchant leaned back in his chair as servants brought a wide variety of dishes for the diners. "Lord Borric," said Talbott, "when your man Meecham first approached me, his request on your behalf was somewhat vague, due, I believe, to the manner in which the information was transmitted." He referred to the magic employed by Kulgan to contact Belgan, who had in turn sent the message to Meecham. "I never expected your desire to reach Krondor would prove as vital to my own people as I now see it to be." He paused, then continued, "I am, of course, alarmed by the news you bear. I was willing to act as a broker to find you a ship, but now I will undertake to send you in one of my own vessels." He picked up a small bell that sat near his hand and rang. In a moment a servant was standing at his shoulder. "Send word to Captain Abram to ready the Storm Queen. He leaves on tomorrow's afternoon tide for Krondor. I will send more detailed instructions later."

The servant bowed and left. The Duke said, "I thank you, Master Kilrane. I had hoped that you would understand, but I did not expect to find a ship so quickly."

The merchant looked directly at Borric. "Duke Borric, let me be frank. There is little love lost between the Free Cities and the Kingdom. And, to be franker still, less love for the name conDoin. It was your grandfather who laid waste to Walinor and siege to Natal. He was stopped only ten miles north of this very city, and that memory still rankles many of us. We are Keshian by ancestry, but freemen by birth, and have little affection for conquerors." Kilrane continued as the Duke sat stiffly in his chair, "Still, we are forced to admit that your father later, and yourself now, have been good neighbors, treating fairly with the Free Cities, even generously at times. I believe you to be a man of honor and realize these Tsurani people are likely all you say they are. You are not the sort of man given to exaggeration, I think."

The Duke relaxed a little at this. Talbott took a sip of wine, then resumed his conversation. "We would be foolish not to recognize that our best interests lie with those of the Kingdom, for alone we are helpless.

When you have departed, I will summon a meeting of the Council of Guilds and Merchants and will argue for support of the Kingdom in this." He smiled, and all at the table could see that here was a man as confident in his influence and authority as the Duke was in his. "I think

I will have little difficulty in making the council see the wisdom of this. A brief mention of that Tsurani war galley and a little conjecture on how our ships would fare against a fleet of such ships should convince them."

Borric laughed and slapped his hand upon the table. "Master merchant, I can see your wealth was not acquired by a lucky cast of fate's knucklebones. Your shrewd mind is a match for my own Father Tully's. As is your wisdom. I give you my thanks."

The Duke and the merchant continued to talk late into the night, but Pug was still tired and returned to his bed. When Kulgan came in hours later, he found the boy lying restfully, a peaceful expression on his face.

THE STORM QUEEN ran before the wind, her topgallants and sky sails slamming her through the raging sea. The swirling, stinging icy rain made the night so black that the tops of her tall masts were lost in hazy darkness to those who stood on her decks.

On the quarterdeck, figures huddled under great fur-lined oilcloth cloaks, trying to stay warm and dry in the bitterly cold wetness. Twice during the last two weeks they had run through high seas, but this was by far the worst weather they had encountered. A cry went up from the rigging, and word was carried to the captain that two men had fallen from the yards. Duke Borric shouted to Captain Abram, "Can nothing be done?"

"Nay, my lord. They are dead men, and to search would be folly, even if possible, which it is not," the captain shouted back, his voice carrying over the storm's roar.

A full watch was above in the treacherous rigging, knocking away the ice that was forming on the spars, threatening to crack them with additional weight, disabling the ship. Captain Abram held the rail with one hand, watching for signs of trouble, his whole body in tune with his ship. Next to him stood the Duke and Kulgan, less sure of their footing on the pitching deck. A loud groaning, cracking sound came from below, and the captain swore.

Moments later a sailor appeared before them. "Captain, we've cracked a timber and she's taking water."

The captain waved to one of his mates who stood on the main deck.

"Take a crew below and shore up the damage, then report."

The mate quickly picked four men to accompany him below. Kulgan seemed to go into a trance for a minute before he said, "Captain, this storm will blow another three days."

The captain cursed the luck the gods had sent him and said to the Duke, "I can't run her before the storm for three days taking water. I must find a place to heave to and repair the hull."

The Duke nodded, shouting over the storm, "Are you turning for Queg?"

The captain shook his head, dislodging snow and water dripping from his black beard. "I cannot turn her into the wind for Queg. We will have to lie off Sorcerer's Isle."

Kulgan shook his head, though the gesture was not noticed by the others. The magician asked, "Is there nowhere else we can put in?"

The captain looked at the magician and the Duke. "Not as close. We would risk the loss of a mast. Then, if we didn't founder and sink, we'd lose six days rather than three. The seas run higher, and I fear I may lose more men." He shouted orders aloft and to the steersman, and they took a more southerly course, heading for Sorcerer's Isle.

Kulgan went below with the Duke. The rocking, surging motion of the ship made the ladder and narrow passageway difficult to negotiate, and the stout magician was tossed from one side to the other as they made their way to their cabins. The Duke went into his cabin, shared with his son, and Kulgan entered his own. Gardan, Meecham, and Pug were trying to rest on their respective bunks during the buffeting. The boy was having a difficult time, for he had been sick the first two days. He had gained sea legs of a sort, but still couldn't bring himself to eat the salty pork and hardtack they were forced to consume. Because of the rough seas, the ship's cook had been unable to perform his usual duties. The ship's timbers groaned in protest at the pounding the waves were giving, and from ahead they could hear the sound of hammers as the work crew struggled to repair the breached hull.

Pug rolled over and looked at Kulgan. "What about the storm?"

Meecham came up on one elbow and looked at his master. Gardan did likewise. Kulgan said, "It will blow three days longer. We will put in to the lee of an island and hold there until it slackens."

"What island?" asked Pug.

"Sorcerer's Isle."

Meecham shot up out of his bunk, hitting his head on the low ceiling.

Cursing and rubbing his head, while Gardan stifled a laugh, he exclaimed, "The island of Macros the Black?"

Kulgan nodded, while using one hand to steady himself as the ship nosed over a high crest and forward into a deep trough. "The same. I have little liking for the idea, but the captain fears for the ship." As if to punctuate the point, the hull creaked and groaned alarmingly for a moment.

"who is Macros?" asked Pug.

Kulgan looked thoughtful for a moment, as much from listening to the work crew in the hold as from the boy's question, then said, "Macros is a great sorcerer, Pug. Perhaps the greatest the world has ever known."

"Aye," added Meecham, "and the spawn of some demon from the deepest circle of hell. His arts are the blackest, and even the bloody Priests of Ilim-Kragma fear to set foot on his island."

Gardan laughed. "I have yet to see a wizard who could cow the death goddess's priests. He must be a powerful mage."

"Those are only stories, Pug," Kulgan said. "What we do know about him is that when the persecution of magicians reached its height in the Kingdom, Macros fled to this island. No one has since traveled to or from it."

Pug sat up on his bunk, interested in what he was hearing, oblivious to the terrible noise of the storm. He watched as Kulgan's face was bathed in moving half lights and shadows by the crazily swinging lantern that danced with every lurch of the ship.

"Macros is very old," Kulgan continued. "By what arts he keeps alive, only he knows, but he has lived there over three hundred years." Gardan scoffed, "Or several men by the same name have lived there." Kulgan nodded. "Perhaps. In any event, there is nothing truly known about him, except terrible tales told by sailors. I suspect that even if Macros does practice the darker side of magic, his reputation is greatly inflated, perhaps as a means of securing privacy." A loud cracking noise, as if another timber in the hull had split, quieted them. The cabin rolled with the storm, and Meecham spoke all their minds: "And I'm hoping we'll all be able to stand upon Sorcerer's Isle "

The ship limped into the southern bay of the island. They would have to wait until the storm subsided before they could put divers over the side to inspect the damage to the hull.

Kulgan, Pug, Gardan, and Meecham came out on deck. The weather was slightly kinder with the cliffs cutting the fury of the storm. Pug walked to where the captain and Kulgan were standing. He followed their gaze up to the top of the cliffs.

High above the bay sat a castle, its tall towers outlined against the sky by the grey light of day. It was a strange place, with spires and turrets pointing upward like some clawed hand. The castle was dark save for one window in a high tower that shone with blue, pulsating light, as if lightning had been captured and put to work by the inhabitant.

Pug heard Meecham say, "There, upon the bluff. Macros."

three: days later the divers broke the surface and yelled to the captain their appraisal of the damage. Pug was on the main deck with Meecham, Gardan, and Kulgan. Prince Arutha and his father stood near the captain, awaiting the verdict on the ship's condition. Above, the seabirds wheeled, looking for the scraps and garbage heralded by a ship in these waters. The storms of winter did little to supplement the meager feeding of the birds, and a ship was a welcome source of fare.

Arutha came down to the main deck where the others waited. "It will take all of this day and half tomorrow to repair the damage, but the captain thinks it will hold fair until we reach Krondor. We should have little trouble from here."

Meecham and Gardan threw each other meaningful glances. Not wanting to let the opportunity pass, Kulgan said, "Will we be able to put ashore, Your Highness?"

Arutha rubbed his clean-shaven chin with a gloved hand. "Aye, though not one sailor will put out a boat to carry us."

"Us?" asked the magician.

Arutha smiled his crooked smile. "I have had my fill of cabins, Kulgan.

I feel the need to stretch my legs on firm ground. Besides, without supervision, you'd spend the day wandering about places where you've no business." Pug looked up toward the castle, his glance noted by the magician.

"we'll keep clear of that castle and the road up from the beach, to be sure. The tales of this island only speak of ill coming to those who seek to enter the sorcerer's halls."

Arutha signaled a seaman. A boat was readied, and the four men and the boy got aboard. The boat was hauled over the side and lowered by a crew sweating despite the cold wind that still blew after the storm. By the glances they kept throwing toward the crest of the bluffs, Pug knew they were not sweating because of work or weather.

As if reading his thoughts, Arutha said, "There may be a more superstitious breed on Midkemia than sailors, but who they are I could not tell you."

When the boat was in the water, Meecham and Gardan cast off the lines that hung suspended from the davits. The two men awkwardly took oars and began to row toward the beach. It was a broken, stuttering rhythm at first, but with disapproving looks from the Prince, along with several comments about how men could spend their lives in a sea town and not know how to row, they finally got the boat moving in good order.

They put in at a sandy stretch of beach, a little cove that broke the bluffs of the bay. Upward toward the castle ran a path, which joined another leading away across the island.

Pug leaped out of the boat and helped pull it ashore. When it was fast aground, the others got out and stretched their legs.

Pug felt as if they were being watched, but each time he looked around, there was nothing in sight but the rocks, and the few seabirds that lived the winter in clefts of the cliff face.

Kulgan and the Prince studied the two paths up from the beach. The magician looked at the other path, away from the sorcerer's castle, and said, "There should be little harm in exploring the other trail. Shall we?"

Days of boredom and confinement outweighed whatever anxiety they felt. With a brusque nod, Arutha led the way up the trail.

"I" Pug followed last, behind Meecham. The big-shouldered franklin was armed with a broadsword, upon which his hand rested. Pug kept his sling handy, for he still didn't feel comfortable with a sword, though Meecham was giving him lessons when possible. The boy fingered the sling absently, his eyes taking in the scene before them.

Along the trail they startled several colonies of turnstones and plovers, which took flight when the party came near. The birds squawked their protests and hovered near their roosts until the hikers "jpsed, then returned to the scant comfort of the hillside.

They crested the first of a series of hills, and the path away from the castle could be seen to dip behind another crest. Kulgan said, "It must lead somewhere. Shall we continue?" Arutha nodded, and the others . said nothing. They continued their journey until they came to a small valley, little more than a dell, between two ranges of low hills. On the floor of the valley sat some buildings.

Arutha said softly, "What do you think, Kulgan? Are they inhabited?"

Kullgan studied them for a moment, then turned to Meecham, who stepped forward. The franklin inspected the vista below, his gaze traveling from the floor of the vale to the hills around. "I think not. There is no sign of smoke from cook fires, nor sound of people working."

Arutha resumed his march down toward the floor of the valley, and the others followed. Meecham turned to watch Pug for a moment, then



noticed the boy was unarmed except for his sling. The franklin pulled a ~ hunting knife from his belt and handed it to the boy without comment. Pug bobbed his head once in acknowledgment and took the knife in silence.

They reached a plateau above the buildings, and Pug could see an alien-looking house, the central building circled by a large court and several outbuildings. The entire property was surrounded by a low wall, no more than four feet tall.

They worked their way down the hillside to a gate in the wall. There were several barren fruit trees in the courtyard, and a garden area overgrown with weeds. Near the front of the central building a fountain stood, topped with a statue of three dolphins. They approached the fountain and saw that the interior of the low pool surrounding the statue was covered in blue tiles, faded and discolored with age. Kulgan examined the construction of the fountain. "This is fashioned in a clever manner. I believe that water should issue from the mouths of the dolphins."

Arutha agreed. "I have seen the King's fountains in Rillanon, and they are similar, though lacking the grace of this."

There was little snow on the ground, for it seemed the sheltered valley and the entire island received little even in the most severe winters.

But it was still cold. Pug wandered a little way off and studied the house. It had a single story, with windows every ten feet along the wall. There was but one opening for a double door in the wall he stood facing, though the doors were long off their hinges.

"Whoever lived here expected no trouble."

Pug turned to see Gardan standing behind him, staring at the house as well. "There is no tower for lookout," continued the Sergeant. "And the low wall seems more likely to keep livestock out of the gardens than for defense."

Meecham joined them, hearing Gardan's last remark. "Aye, there is little concern for defense here. This is the lowest spot on the island, save for that small stream you could see behind the house when we came down the hill." He turned to stare up at the castle, the highest spires of which could still be seen from the valley. "There is where you build for trouble. This place," he said, indicating the low buildings with a sweep of his hand, "was fashioned by those who knew little of strife." Pug nodded as he moved away. Gardan and Meecham headed in a different direction, toward an abandoned stable.

Pug moved around to the back of the house and found several smaller buildings. He clutched his knife in his right hand and entered the closest.

It was open to the sky, for the roof had collapsed. Red roof tiles, shattered and faded, lay about the floor, in what seemed to be a storeroom, with large wooden shelves along three walls. Pug investigated the other rooms in the building, finding them to be of similar configuration. The entire building was some sort of storage area.

He moved to the next building and found a large kitchen. A stone stove stood against one wall, big enough for several kettles to cook upon it simultaneously, while a spit hung over a back opening above the fire was large enough for a beef side or whole lamb. A mammoth butcher's block stood in the center of the room, scarred from countless blows of cleaver and knife.

Pug examined a strange-looking bronze pot in the corner, overlaid with dust and cobwebs. He turned it over and found a wooden spoon. As he looked up, he thought he saw a glimpse of someone outside the door of the cookhouse.

"Meecham? Gardan?" he asked, as he slowly approached the door. When he stepped outside, there was no one in sight, but he did catch another glimpse of movement at the rear door of the main house. He hurried toward that door, assuming his companions had already entered the building. As he entered the main house, he caught a hint of movement down a side corridor. He stopped for a moment to survey this strange house.

The door before him stood open, a sliding door fallen from railings that had once held it in place. Through the door he could see a large central courtyard, open to the sky above. The house was actually a hollow square, with pillars holding up the interior of the partial roof. Another fountain and a small garden occupied the very center of the courtyard. Like the one outside, the fountain was in disrepair, and this garden was also choked with weeds.

Pug turned toward the hall down which he had seen movement. He passed through a low side door into a shadowy corridor. In places the roof had lost several tiles, so that occasionally light shone down from above, making it easy for the boy to find his way. He passed two empty rooms; he suspected they might be sleeping quarters.

He turned a corner to find himself before the door of an odd-looking room and entered. The walls were tile mosaics, of sea creatures sporting in the foam with scantily dressed men and women. The style of art was new to Pug. The few tapestries and fewer paintings on display in the Duke's halls were all very lifelike, with muted colors and detailed execution in the finish. These mosaics were suggestive of people and animals without capturing details.

In the floor was a large depression, like a pool, with steps leading down before him. Out of the wall opposite protruded a brass fish head, hanging over the pool. The nature of the room was beyond Pug.

As if someone had read his thoughts, a voice from behind said, "It is a tepidarium."

Pug turned and saw a man standing behind him. He was of average height, with a high forehead and deep-set black eyes. There were streaks of grey at the temples of his dark hair, but his beard was black as night. He wore a brown robe of simple material, a whipcord belt around the waist. In his left hand he held a sturdy oak staff. Pug came on guard, holding the long hunting knife before him.

"Nay, lad. Put up your scramasax, I mean you no harm." He smiled in a way that made Pug relax.

Pug lowered his knife and said, "What did you call this room?"

"A tepidarium," he said, entering the room. "Here warm water was piped into the pool, and bathers would remove their clothing and place them on those shelves." He pointed to some shelves against the rear wall.

"Servants would clean and dry the clothing of dinner guests while they bathed here."

Pug thought the idea of dinner guests bathing at someone's home in a group a novel one, but he said nothing. The man continued, "Through that door"-he pointed to a door next to the pool-"was another pool with very hot water, in a room called a calidarium. Beyond was another pool with cold water in a room called a frigidarium. There was a fourth room called the unctorium, where servants would rub down the bathers with scented oils. And they scraped their skins with wooden sticks. They didn't use soap then."

Pug was confused by all the different bathing rooms. "That sounds like a lot of time spent getting clean. This is all very odd."

The man leaned on his staff. "So it must seem to you, Pug. Still, I expect those that built this house would consider your keep halls strange as well." Pug

started. "How did you know my name?"

The man smiled again. "I heard the tall soldier call you by name as you approached the building. I was watching you, keeping out of sight until I was sure you were not pirates come to seek ancient loot. Few pirates come so young, so I thought it would be safe to talk to you."

Pug studied the man. There was something about him that suggested hidden meanings in his words. "Why would you speak with me?"

The man sat on the edge of the empty pool. The hem of his robe was pulled back, revealing cross-gartered sandals of sturdy construction. "I am alone mostly, and the chance to speak with strangers is a rare thing. So I thought to see if you would visit with me awhile, for a few moments at least, until you return to your ship."

Pug sat down also, but kept a comfortable distance between himself and the stranger. "Do you live here?"

The man looked around the room. "No, though I once did, long ago." There was a contemplative note in his voice, as if the admission were calling up long-buried memories.

"Who are you?"

The man smiled again, and Pug felt his nervousness vanish. There was something reassuring about his manner, and Pug could see that he intended no harm. "Mostly I am called the traveler, for many lands have I seen. Here I am sometimes known as the hermit, for so I live. You may call me what you like. It is all the same."

Pug looked at him closely. "Have you no proper name?"

"Many, so many that I have forgotten a few. At the time of my birth I was given a name, as you were, but among those of my tribe it is a name known only to the father and the mage-priest."

Pug considered this. "It is all very strange, much like this house. Who are your people?"

The man called the traveler laughed, a good-natured chuckle. "You have a curious mind, Pug, full of questions. That is good." He paused for a moment, then said, "Where are you and your companions from? The ship in the bay flies the Natalese banner of Bordon, but your accent and dress are of the Kingdom."

Pug said, "We are of Crydee," and gave the man a brief description of the journey. The man asked a few simple questions, and without being aware of it, Pug found that soon he had given a full accounting of the events that had brought them to the island, and the plans for the rest of

the journey.

When he had finished, the traveler said, "That is a wondrous story indeed. I should think there will be many more wonders before this strange meeting of worlds is finished."

Pug questioned him with a look. "I don't understand."

The traveler shook his head. "I don't expect you to, Pug. Let us say that things are occurring that can be understood only by examination -after the fact, with a distance of time separating the participants from the participating."

Pug scratched his knee. "You sound like Kulgan, trying to explain how magic works."

The traveler nodded. "An apt comparison. Though sometimes the only way to understand the workings of magic is to work magic."

Pug brightened. "Are you also a magician?"

The traveler stroked his long black beard. "Some have thought me one, but I doubt that Kulgan and I share the same understanding of such things."

Pug's expression showed he considered this an unsatisfactory explanation even if he didn't say so. The traveler leaned forward. "I can effect a spell or two, if that answers your question, young Pug."

Pug heard his name shouted from the courtyard. "Come," said the traveler. "Your friends call. We had best go and reassure them that you are all right."

They left the bathing room and crossed the open court of the inner garden. A large anteroom separated the garden from the front of the house, and they passed through to the outside. When the others saw Pug in the company of the traveler, they looked around quickly, their ~ weapons drawn. Kulgan and the Prince crossed the court to stand before them. The traveler put up his hands in the universal sign that he was unarmed.

The Prince was the first to speak. "Who is your companion, Pug?"

Pug introduced the traveler. "He means no harm. He hid until he could see that we were not pirates." He handed the knife to Meecham. If the explanation was unsatisfactory, Arutha gave no sign. "What is your business here?"

The traveler spread his hands, with the staff in the crook of his left arm. "I abide here, Prince of Crydee. I should think that the question better serves me."

The Prince stiffened at being addressed so, but after a tense moment relaxed. "If that is so, then you are correct, for we are the intruders. We came seeking relief from the solitary confines of the ship. Nothing more."

The traveler nodded. "Then you are welcome at Villa Beata."

Kulgan said, "What is Villa Beata?"

The traveler made a sweeping motion with his right hand. "This home is Villa Beata. In the language of the builders, it means 'blessed home,' and so it was for many years. As you can see, it has known better days."

Everyone was relaxing with the traveler, for they also felt a reassurance in his easy manner and friendly smile. Kulgan said, "what of those

who built this strange place?"

"Dead . . . or gone. They thought this the Insula Beata, or Blessed Isle, when they first came here. They fled a terrible war, which changed the history of their world." His dark eyes misted over, as if the pain of remembering was great. "A great king died . . . or is thought to have died, for some say he may return. It was a terrible and sad time. Here they sought to live in peace."

"What happened to them?" asked Pug.

The traveler shrugged. "Pirates, or goblins? Sickness, or madness? Who can tell? I saw this home as you see it now, and those who lived here were gone."

Arutha said, "You speak of strange things, friend traveler. I know little of such, but it seems that this place has been deserted for ages. How is it you knew those who lived here?"

The traveler smiled. "It is not so long ago as you would imagine, Prince of Crydee. And I am older than I look. It comes from eating well and bathing regularly."

Meecham had been studying the stranger the entire time, for of all those who had come ashore, his was the most suspicious nature. "And what of the Black One? Does he not trouble you?"

The traveler looked over his shoulder at the top of the castle.

"Macros the Black? The magician and I have little cause to be at odds. He suffers me the run of the island, as long as I don't interfere with his work."

A suspicion crossed Pug's mind, but he said nothing, as the traveler continued. "Such a powerful and terrible sorcerer has little to fear from a simple hermit, I'm sure you'll agree." He leaned forward and added in conspiratorial tones, "Besides, I think much of his reputation is inflated and overboasted, to keep intruders away. I doubt he is capable of the feats attributed to him."

Arutha said, "Then perhaps we should visit this sorcerer."

The hermit looked at the Prince. "I don't think you would find a welcome at the castle. The sorcerer is oftentimes preoccupied with his work and suffers interruption with poor grace. He may not be the mythical author of all the world's ills that some imagine him to be, but he could still cause more trouble than it is worth to visit him. On the whole he is often poor company." There was a faint, wry hint of humor in his words.

Arutha looked around and said, "I think we have seen all of interest we are likely to. Perhaps we should return to the ship."

When none disagreed, the Prince said, "What of you, friend traveler?"

The stranger spread his hands in a general gesture. "I continue my habit of solitude, Your Highness. I have enjoyed this small visit, and the boy's news of the occurrences of the world outside, but I doubt that you would find me tomorrow if you were to seek me."

It was evident he was unlikely to provide any more information, and Arutha found himself growing irritated with the man's obscure answers.

"Then we bid you farewell, traveler. May the gods watch over you."

"And you as well, Prince of Crydee."

As they turned to leave, Pug felt something trip his ankle, and he fell

hard against Kulgan. Both went down in a tangle of bodies, and the traveler helped the boy up. hdeecham and Gardan assisted the stout mage to his feet. Kulgan put weight upon his foot and started to fall. Arutha and Meecham grabbed him. The traveler said, "It appears your ankle is turned, friend magician. Here." He held out his staff. "My staff is stout oak and will bear your weight as you return to the ship." Kulgan took the offered staff and put his weight on it. He took an experimental step and found that he could negotiate the path with the aid of the staff. "Thank you, but what of yourself?" The stranger shrugged. "A simple staff, easily replaced, friend magician. Perhaps I shall have the opportunity of reclaiming it someday." "I will keep it against that day." The traveler turned away, saying, "Good. Then until that day, again farewell." They watched as he walked back into the building, and then turned to face each other, expressions of wonder upon their faces. Arutha was the first to speak. "A strange man, this traveler." Kulgan nodded. "More strange than you know, Prince. At his leaving I feel the lifting of some enchantment, as if he carries a spell about him, one that makes all near him trusting." Pug turned to Kulgan. "I wanted to ask him so many questions, but I didn't seem to be able to make myself." Meecham said, "Aye, I felt that also." Gardan said, "There is a thought in my mind. I think we have been speaking to the sorcerer himself." Pug said, "That is my thought." Kulgan leaned on the staff and said, "Perhaps. If it is so, then he has his own reasons for masking his identity." They talked about this as they walked slowly up the path from the villa. As they reached the cove where the boat was beached, Pug felt something brush against his chest. He reached inside his tunic and found a small folded piece of parchment. He withdrew it, startled by his find. He had not picked it up, as well as he could remember. The traveler must have slipped it inside his shirt when he had helped Pug to his feet. Kulgan looked back as he started for the boat and, seeing Pug's expression, said, "What have you there?"

Pug handed the parchment over, while the others gathered around the magician. Kulgan unfolded the parchment. He read it, and a surprised expression crossed his face. He read it again, aloud. "I welcome those who come with no malice in their hearts. You will know in days to come that our meeting was not by chance. Until we meet again, keep the hermit's staff as a sign of friendship and goodwill. Seek me not until the appointed time, for that too is foreordained. Macros." Kulgan handed the message back to Pug, who read it. "Then the hermit was Macros!" Meecham rubbed his beard. "This is something beyond my understanding."

Kulgan looked up to the castle, where the lights still flashed in the single window. "As it is beyond mine, old friend. But whatever it means, I think the sorcerer wishes us well, and I find that a good thing."

They returned to the ship and retired to their cabins. After a night of rest, they found the ship ready to leave on the midday tide. As they raised sail, they were greeted with unseasonably light breezes, blowing them directly for Krondor.

## 12 COUNCILS

Pug WAS RESTLESS.

He sat looking out a window of the Prince's palace in Krondor. Outside, the snow was falling, as it had been for the last three days. The Duke and Arutha had been meeting with the Prince of Krondor daily. On the first day Pug had told his story about finding the Tsurani ship, then had been dismissed. He remembered that awkward interview. He had been surprised to find the Prince to be young, in his thirties, if not a vigorous and well man. Pug had been startled during their interview when the Prince's remarks were interrupted by a violent attack of coughing. His pale face, drenched with sweat, showed him to be in worse health than his manner indicated.

He had waved off Pug's suggestion that he should leave and come back when more convenient for him. Erland of Krondor was a reflective person, who listened patiently to Pug's narration, lessening the boy's discomfort at being before the heir apparent to the throne of the Kingdom.

His eyes regarded Pug with reassurance and understanding, as if it were a common thing to have awkward boys standing before him. After listening to Pug's narration, he had spent a short time talking with Pug about small things, such as his studies and his fortuitous rise to the nobility, as if these were important matters to his realm.

Pug decided he liked Prince Erland. The second most powerful man in the Kingdom, and the single most powerful man in the West, was warm and friendly and cared for the comfort of his least-important guest.

Pug looked around the room, still not used to the splendor of the palace. Even this small room was richly appointed, with a canopied bed instead of a sleeping pallet. It was the first time Pug had ever slept in one, and he found it difficult to get comfortable' on the deep, soft, feather-stuffed mattress. In the corner of the room stood a closet with more clothing in it than he thought he could wear in his lifetime, all of costly weave and fine cut, and all seemingly in his size. Kulgan had said it was a gift from the Prince.

The quiet of his room reminded Pug how little he had seen of Kulgan and the others. Gardan and his soldiers had left that morning with a bundle of dispatches for Prince Lyam from his father, and Meecham was housed with the palace guard. Kulgan was invited in the meetings as often as not, so Pug had a lot of time to himself. He wished he had his books with him, for then at least the time could be put to some good use. Since his arrival in Krondor there had been little for him to do.

More than once Pug had thought of how much Tomas would have

loved the newness of this place-seemingly fashioned from glass and magic more than stone-and the people in it. He thought about his lost friend, hoping Dolgan had somehow found him, but not believing he had. The pain of loss was now a dull ache, but still tender. Even after the last month, he would find himself turning, expecting to see Tomas close by.

Not wishing to sit idle any longer, Pug opened the door and looked down the hallway that ran the length of the east wing of the Prince's palace. He hurried down the hall, looking for any familiar face to break the monotony.

A guard passed him by, going the other way, and saluted. Pug still couldn't get used to the idea of being saluted every time a guard passed, but as a member of the Duke's party he was given full honors due his Squire's rank by the household staff.

Reaching a smaller hallway, he decided to explore. One way was the same as another, he thought. The Prince had personally told him he had the run of the palace, but Pug had been shy about overstepping himself. Now boredom drove him to adventuring, or at least as much adventuring as possible under the circumstances.

Pug found a small alcove with a window, providing a different view of the palace grounds. Pug sat upon the window seat. Beyond the palace walls he could see the port of Krondor lying below like a white-shrouded toy village. Smoke was coming from many of the buildings, the only sign of life in the city. The ships in the harbor looked like miniatures, lying at anchor, waiting for more propitious conditions under which to sail.

A small voice behind him brought Pug out of his reverie. "Are you Prince Arutha?"

A girl was standing behind him, about six or seven years old, with big green eyes and dark reddish brown hair done up in silver netting. Her dress was simple but fine looking, of red cloth with white lace at the sleeves. Her face was pretty, but was set in an expression of deep concentration that gave it a comic gravity.

Pug hesitated for a moment, then said, "No, I'm Pug. I came with the Prince."

The girl made no attempt to hide her disappointment. With a shrug she came over and sat next to Pug. She looked up at him with the same grave expression and said, "I was so hoping that you might be the Prince, for I wanted to catch a glimpse of him before you leave for Salador."

"Salador," Pug said flatly. He had hoped the journey would end with the visit to the Prince. Lately he had been thinking of Carline.

"Yes. Father says you are all to leave at once for Salador, then take a ship for Rillanon to see the King."

"Who's your father?"

"The Prince, silly. Don't you know anything?"

"I guess not." Pug looked at the girl, seeing another Carline in the making. "You must be Princess Anita."

"Of course. And I'm a real princess too. Not the daughter of a duke, but the daughter of a prince. My father would have been King if he had wanted, but he didn't want to. If he had, I would be Queen someday.



But I won't be. What do you do?"

The question, coming so suddenly without preamble, caught Pug off guard. The child's prattling wasn't very irksome, and he wasn't following closely, being more intent on the scene through the window.

He hesitated, then said, "I'm apprenticed to the Duke's magician."

The Princess's eyes grew round, and she said, "A real magician?"

"Real enough."

Her little face lit up with delight. Can he turn people into toads?

Mummy said magicians turn people into toads if they are bad."

"I don't know. I'll ask him when I see him-if I see him again," he added under his breath.

"Oh, would you? I would so very much like to know." She seemed utterly fascinated by the prospect of finding out if the tale was true.

"And could you please tell me where I might see Prince Arutha?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him myself in two days. What do you want to see him for?"

"Mummy says I may marry him someday. I want to see if he is a nice man."

The prospect of this tiny child's being married to the Duke's younger son confounded Pug for a moment. It was not an uncommon practice for nobles to pledge their children in marriage years before their coming of age. In ten years she would be a woman, and the Prince would still be a young man, the Earl of some minor keep in the Kingdom. Still, Pug found the prospect fascinating.

"Do you think you would like living with an earl?" Pug asked, realizing at once it was a stupid question. The Princess confirmed the opinion with a glance that would have done Father Tully credit.

She said, "Silly! How could I possibly know that when I don't even know who Mummy and Father will have me marry?"

The child jumped up. "Well, I must go back. I'm not supposed to be here. If they find me out of my rooms, I'll be punished. I hope you have a nice journey to Salador and Rillanon."

"Thank you."

With a sudden expression of worry, she said, "You won't tell anyone that I was here, will you?"

Pug gave her a conspiratorial smile. "No. Your secret's safe." With a look of relief, she smiled and peeked both ways down the hallway. As she started to leave, Pug said, "He's a nice man."

The Princess stopped. "Who?"

"The Prince. He's a nice man. Given to brooding and moods, but on the whole a nice person."

The Princess frowned for a moment as she digested the information.

Then, with a bright smile, she said, "That's good. I'd not want to marry a man who's not nice." With a giggle she turned the corner and was gone.

Pug sat awhile longer, watching the snow fall, musing over the fact of children being concerned about matters of state, and over a child with ' big, serious green eyes. '

THAT NIGHT the entire party was feasted by the Prince. The whole population of nobles at court and most of the rich commoners of Krondor were

attending the gala. Over four hundred people sat to dine, and Pug found himself at a table with strangers who, out of respect for the quality of his clothing and the simple fact of his being there in the first place, politely ignored him. The Duke and Prince Arutha were seated at the head table with Prince Erland and his wife, Princess Alicia, along with Duke Dulanic, Chancellor of the Principality and Knight-Marshal of Krondor. Owing to Erland's ill health, the business of running Krondor's military fell to Dulanic and the man he was deep in conversation with, Lord Barry, Erland's Lord-Admiral of the Krondorian fleet. Other royal ministers were seated nearby, while the rest of the guests were at smaller tables. Pug was seated at the one farthest removed from the royal table.

Servants were bustling in and out of the hall, carrying large platters of food and decanters of wine. Jongleurs strolled the hall, singing the newest ballads and ditties. Jugglers and acrobats performed between the tables, mostly ignored by the dinner guests, but giving their best, for the Master of Ceremony would not call them back again should he judge their efforts lacking.

The walls were covered with giant banners and rich tapestries. The banners were of every major household in the Kingdom, from the gold and brown of Crydee in the far west, to the white and green of far Ran, in the east. Behind the royal table hung the banner of the Kingdom, a golden lion rampant holding a sword, with a crown above his head, upon a field of purple, the ancient crest of the conDoin kings. Next to it hung Krondor's banner, an eagle flying above a mountain peak, silver upon the royal purple. Only the Prince, and the King in Rillanon, could wear the royal color. Borric and Arutha wore red mantles over their tunics, signifying they were princes of the realm, related to the royal family. It was the first time Pug had ever seen the two wearing the formal marks of their station.

Everywhere were sights and sounds of gaiety, but even from across the room Pug could tell that the talk at the Prince's table was subdued. Borric and Erland spent most of the dinner with their heads close together, speaking privately.

Pug was startled by a touch on his shoulder and turned to see a dolllike face peering through the large curtains not two feet behind him. Princess Anita put her finger to her lips and beckoned for him to step through. Pug saw the others at the table were looking at the great and near-great in the room and would scarcely notice the departure of a nameless boy. He rose and moved through the curtain, finding himself in a small servants' alcove. Before him was another curtain, leading to the kitchen, Pug supposed, through which peeked the tiny fugitive from bed. Pug moved to where Anita waited, discovering it was, indeed, a long connecting corridor between the kitchen and the great hall. A lengthy table covered with dishware and goblets ran along the wall. Pug said, "What are you doing here?"

"Shush!" she said in a loud whisper. "I'm not supposed to be here." Pug smiled at the child. "I don't think you have to worry about being heard, there's too much noise for that."

"I came to see the Prince. Which one is he?"

Pug motioned for her to step into the small alcove, then drew aside

the curtain a little. Pointing at the head table, he said, "He's two removed from your father, in the black-and-silver tunic and red mantle." The child stretched up on tiptoe and said, "I can't see."

Pug held the girl up for a moment. She smiled at him. "I am in your debt."

"Not at all," Pug intoned with mock gravity. They both giggled.

The Princess started as a voice spoke close to the curtain. "I must fly!" She darted through the alcove, passed through the second curtain, and disappeared from sight heading toward the kitchen and her getaway.

The curtain into the banquet hall parted, and a startled servant stared at Pug. Uncertain what to say, the servingman nodded. The boy by rights shouldn't be there, but by his dress he was certainly someone. Pug looked about and, without much conviction, finally said, "I was looking for the way to my room. I must be going the wrong way." "The guest wing is through the first door on the left in the dining hall, young sir. Ah . . . this way lies the kitchen. Would you care to have me show you the way?" The servant obviously didn't care to do so, and Pug was equally lacking any desire for a guide. "No, thank you, I can find it," he said.

Pug rejoined his table, unnoticed by the other guests. The balance of the meal passed without incident, except for an occasional strange glance by a servingman.

Pug PASSED the time after dinner talking with the son of a merchant. The two young men found each other in the crowded room where the Prince's after-dinner reception was being held. They spent a fitful hour being polite to one another, before the boy's father came and took him in tow. Pug stood around being ignored by the Prince's other dinner guests for a while, then decided he could slip back to his own quarters without affronting anyone—he wouldn't be missed. Besides he hadn't seen the Prince, Lord Borric, or Kulgan since they left the dinner table. Most of the reception seemed under the supervision of a score of household officials and Princess Alicia, a charming woman who had spoken politely with Pug for a moment as he passed through the reception line. Pug found Kulgan waiting for him in his room when he returned. Kulgan said, without preamble, "We leave at first light, Pug. Prince Erland is sending us on to Rillanon to see the King."

Pug said, "Why is the Prince sending us?" His tone was cross, for he was deeply homesick.

Before Kulgan could answer, the door flew open and Prince Arutha came storming in. Pug was surprised by Arutha's expression of unconfined anger.

"Kulgan! There you are," Arutha said, slamming the door. "Do you know what our royal cousin is doing about the Tsurani invasion?" Before Kulgan could speak, the Prince supplied the answer. "Nothing! He won't lift a finger to send aid to Crydee until Father has seen the King. That will take another two months at least."

Kulgan raised his hand. Instead of an adviser to the Duke, Arutha saw one of his boyhood instructors. Kulgan, like Tully, could still command both sons of the Duke when the need arose. "Quietly, Arutha."

Arutha shook his head as he pulled over a chair. "I am sorry, Kulgan. I should have mastered my temper." He noticed Pug's confusion. "I apologize to you also, Pug. There is much involved here that you don't know of. Perhaps . . ." He looked questioningly at Kulgan.

Kulgan took out his pipe. "You might as well tell him, he's going along for the journey. He'll find out soon enough."

Arutha drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair for a moment, then sitting forward, said, "My father and Erland have been conferring for days on the best way to meet these outworlders should they come. The Prince even agrees it is likely they will come." He paused. "But he will do nothing to call the Armies of the West together. until he has been given permission by the King."

"I don't understand," said Pug. "Aren't the Armies of the West the Prince's to command as he sees fit?"

"No longer," said Arutha with a near-grimace. "The King sent word, less than a year ago, that the armies may not be mustered without his permission." Arutha sat back in his chair as Kulgan blew a cloud of smoke. "It is in violation of tradition. Never have the Armies of the West had another commander than the Prince of Krondor, as the Armies of the East are the King's."

Pug was still unclear about the significance of all this. Kulgan said, "The Prince is the King's Lord-Marshal in the West, the only man besides the King who may command Duke Borric and the other KnightGenerals. Should he call, every Duke from Malac's Cross to Crydee would respond, with their garrisons and levies. King Rodric, for his own reasons, has decided that none may gather the armies without his authority.

Arutha said, "Father would come to the Prince's call, regardless, as would the other Dukes."

Kulgan nodded. "That may be what the King fears, for the Armies of the West have long been more the Prince's armies than the King's. If your father called, most would gather, for they revere him nearly as much as they revere Erland. And if the King should say not . . ." He let the sentence slip away.

Arutha nodded. "Strife within the Kingdom."

Kulgan looked at his pipe. "Even to civil war, perhaps."

Pug was troubled by the discussion. He was a keep boy, in spite of his newly acquired title. "Even if it is in defense of the Kingdom?"

Kulgan shook his head slowly. "Even then. For some men, kings also, there is as much importance in the manner in which things are done as the doing." Kulgan paused. "Duke Borric will not speak of it, but there has long been trouble between himself and certain eastern dukes, especially his cousin, Guy du Bas-Tyra. This trouble between the Prince and the King will only add to the strain between West and East."

Pug sat back. He knew that this was somehow more important than what he was understanding, but there were blank places in his picturings of the way things were. How could the King resent the Prince's summoning the armies in defense of the Kingdom? It didn't make sense to him, in spite of Kulgan's explanation. And what sort of trouble in the East was Duke Borric unwilling to speak of?

The magician stood. "We have an early day tomorrow, so we had best

get some sleep. It will be a long ride to Salador, then another long passage by ship to Rillanon. By the time we reach the King, the first thaw will have come to Crydee."

PRINCE ERLAND BADE the party a good journey as they sat upon their horses in the courtyard of the palace. He looked pale and deeply troubled as he wished them well.

The little Princess stood at an upstairs window and waved at Pug with a tiny handkerchief. Pug was reminded of another Princess and wondered if Anita would grow to be like Carline or be more even-tempered.

They rode out of the courtyard, where an escort of Royal Krondorian Lancers stood ready to accompany them to Salador. It would be a three weeks' ride over the mountains and past the marshes of Darkmoor, past Malac's Cross-the dividing point between the western and eastern realms-and on to Salador. There they would take ship, and after another two weeks they would reach Rillanon.

The lancers were shrouded in heavy cloaks of grey, but the purple-and-silver tabards of Krondor's Prince could be seen underneath, and their shields bore the device of the royal Krondorian household. The Duke was being honored by an escort of the Prince's own household guard, rather than a detachment from the city garrison.

As they left the city, the snow began to fall once more, and Pug wondered if he would ever see spring in Crydee again. He sat quietly on his horse as it plodded along the road east, trying to sort out the impressions of the last few weeks, then gave up, resigning himself to whatever was to happen.

THE riDE to Salador took four weeks instead of three, for there had been a storm of unusual intensity in the mountains west of Darkmoor. They had been forced to take lodging at an inn outside the village that took its name from the marshes. It had been a small inn, and they had all been forced to crowd together regardless of rank for several days. The food had been simple and the ale indifferent, and by the time the storm passed, they were all glad to leave Darkmoor behind.

Another day had been lost when they chanced upon a village being troubled by bandits. The sight of approaching cavalry had driven the brigands away, but the Duke had ordered a sweep of the area to insure that they didn't return as soon as the soldiers rode off. The villagers had opened their doors to the Duke's party, welcoming them and offering their best food and warmest beds. Poor offerings by the Duke's standards, yet he received their hospitality with graciousness, for he knew it was all they had. Pug enjoyed the simple food and company, the closest yet to home since he had left Crydee.

when they were a half day's ride short of Salador they encountered a patrol of city guards. The guard captain rode forward. Pulling up his horse, he shouted, "What business brings the Prince's guard to the lands of Salador?" There was little love lost between the two cities, and the Krondorians rode without a heraldic banner. His tone left no doubt that he regarded their presence as an infringement upon his territory. Duke Borric threw back his cloak, revealing his tabard. "Carry word to your master that Borric, Duke of Crydee, approaches the city and would

avail himself of Lord Kerus's hospitality."

The guard captain was taken aback. He stammered, "My apologies, Your Grace. I had no idea . . . there was no banner. . . ."

Arutha said dryly, "We mislaid it in a forest sometime back."

The captain looked confused. "My lord?"

Borric said, "Never mind, Captain. Just send word to your master."

The captain saluted. "At once, Your Grace." He wheeled his horse and signaled for a rider to come forward. He gave him instructions, and the soldier spurred his horse toward the city and soon galloped out of sight.

The captain returned to the Duke. "If Your Grace will permit, my men are at your disposal."

The Duke looked at the travel-weary Krondorians, all of whom seemed to be enjoying the captain's discomfort. "I think thirty men-at-arms are sufficient, Captain. The Salador city guard is renowned for keeping the environs near the city free of brigands."

The captain, not realizing he was being made sport of, seemed to puff up at this. "Thank you, Your Grace."

The Duke said, "You and your men may continue your patrol."

The captain saluted again and returned to his men. He shouted the order to move out, and the guard column moved past the Duke's party.

As they passed the captain ordered a salute, and lances were dipped toward the Duke. Borric returned the salute with a lazy wave of his hand, then when the guards had passed, said, "Enough of this foolishness, let us to Salador."

Arutha laughed and said, "Father, we have need of men like that in the West."

Borric turned and said, "Oh? How so?"

As the horses moved forward, Arutha said, "To polish shields and boots."

The Duke smiled and the Krondorians laughed. The western soldiers held those of the East in low regard. The East had been pacified long before the West had been opened to Kingdom expansion, and there was little trouble in the Eastern Realm requiring real skill in warcraft. The Prince of Krondor's guards were battle-proved veterans, while those of Salador were considered by the guardsmen from the West to do their best soldiering on the parade ground.

Soon they saw signs that they were nearing the city: cultivated farmland, villages, roadside taverns, and wagons laden with trade goods. By sundown they could see the walls of distant Salador.

As they entered the city, a full company of Duke Kerus's own household guards lined the streets to the palace. As in Krondor, there was no castle, for the need for a small, easily defensible keep had passed as the lands around became civilized.

Riding through the city, Pug realized how much of a frontier town Crydee was. In spite of Lord Borric's political power, he was still Lord of a frontier province.

Along the streets, citizens stood gawking at the western Duke from the wild frontier of the Far Coast. Some cheered, for it seemed like a parade, but most stood quietly, disappointed that the Duke and his party looked like other men, rather than blood-drenched barbarians.

When they reached the courtyard of the palace, household servants ran to take their horses. A household guard showed the soldiers from Krondor to the soldiers' commons, where they would rest before returning to the Prince's city. Another, with a captain's badge of rank on his tunic, led Borric's party up the steps of the building.

Pug looked with wonder, for this palace was even larger than the Prince's in Krondor. They walked through several outer rooms, then reached an inner courtyard. Here fountains and trees decorated a garden, beyond which stood the central palace. Pug realized that the building they had passed through was simply one of the buildings surrounding the Duke's living quarters. He wondered what use Lord Kerus could possibly have for so many buildings and such a large staff.

They crossed the garden courtyard and mounted another series of steps toward a reception committee that stood in the door of the central palace. Once this building might have been a citadel, protecting the surrounding town, but Pug couldn't bring himself to imagine it as it might have been ages ago, for numerous renovations over the years had transformed an ancient keep into a glittering thing of glass and marble. Duke Kerus's chamberlain, an old dried-up stick of a man with a quick eye, knew every noble worth noting—from the borders of Kesh in the south to Tyr-Sog in the north-by sight. His memory for faces and facts had often saved Duke Kerus from embarrassment. By the time Borric had made his way up the broad stairway from the courtyard, the chamberlain had provided Kerus with a few personal facts and a quick evaluation of the right amount of flattery required.

Duke Kerus took Borric's hand. "Ah, Lord Borric, you do me great honor by this unexpected visit. If you had only sent word of your arrival, I would have prepared a more fitting welcome."

They entered the antechamber of the palace, the Dukes in front. Borric said, "I am sorry to put you to any trouble Lord Kerus, but I am afraid our mission is dependent on speed, and that the formal courtesies will have to be put aside. I bear messages for the King and must put to sea for Rillanon as soon as is possible."

"Of course, Lord Borric, but you will surely be able to stay for a short while, say a week or two?"

"I regret not. I would put to sea tonight if I could."

"That is indeed sorry news. I so hoped that you could guest with us for a time."

The party reached the Duke's audience hall, where the chamberlain gave instructions to a company of household servants, who jumped to the task of readying rooms for the guests. Entering the vast hall, with its high vaulted ceiling, gigantic chandeliers, and great arched glass windows, Pug felt dwarfed. The room was the largest he had ever seen, greater than the hall of the Prince of Krondor.

A huge table was set with fruits and wine, and the travelers fell to with vigor. Pug sat down with little grace, his whole body one mass of aches. He was turning into a skilled horseman simply from long hours in the saddle, but that fact didn't ease his tired muscles.

Lord Kerus pressed the Duke for the cause of his hurried journey, and between mouthfuls of fruit and drinks of wine, Borric filled him in on the events of the last three months. After he was done, Kerus looked

distressed. "This is grave news indeed, Lord Borric. Things are unsettled in the Kingdom. I am sure the Prince has told you of some of the trouble that has occurred since last you came to the East."

"Yes, he did. But reluctantly and in only the most cursory manner. Remember, it has been thirteen years since I journeyed to the capital, at Rodric's coronation when I came to renew my vassalage. He seemed a bright enough young man then, able enough to learn to govern. But from what I've heard in Krondor, there seems to have been a change." Kerus glanced around the room, then waved away his servants. Looking pointedly at Borric's companions, he raised one eyebrow questioningly.

Lord Borric said, "These have my trust and will not betray a confidence."

Kerus nodded. Loudly he said, "If you would like to stretch your legs before retiring, perhaps you'd care to see my garden?"

Borric frowned and was about to speak when Arutha put his hand upon his father's arm, nodding agreement.

Borric said, "That sounds interesting. Despite the cold I could use a short walk."

The Duke motioned for Kulgan, Meecham, and Gardan to remain, but Lord Kerus indicated Pug should join them. Borric looked surprised, but nodded agreement. They left through a small set of doors to the garden, and once outside, Kerus whispered, "It will look less suspicious if the boy comes with us. I can't even trust my own servants anymore. The King has agents everywhere."

Borric seemed infuriated. "The King has placed agents in your household"

"Yes, Lord Borric, there has been a great change in our King. I know Erland has not told you the entire story, but it is one you must know." The Duke and his companions watched Duke Kerus, who looked uncomfortable. He cleared his throat as he glanced around the snowcovered garden. Between the light from the palace windows and the large moon above, the garden was a winterscape of white and blue crystals, undisturbed by footprints.

Kerus pointed to a set of tracks in the snow and said, "I made those this afternoon when I came here to think about what I could safely tell you." He glanced around one more time, seeing if anyone could overhear the conversation, then continued. "When Rodric the Third died, everyone expected Erland would take the crown. After the official mourning, the Priests of Ishap called all the possible heirs forward to present their claims. You were expected to be one of them."

Borric nodded. "I know the custom. I was late getting to the city. I would have renounced the claim in any event, so there was no importance in my absence."

Kerus nodded. "History might have been different had you been here, Borric." He lowered his voice. "I risk my neck by saying this, but many, even those of us here in the East would have urged you to take the crown."

Borric's expression showed he did not like hearing this, but Kerus pressed on. "By the time you got here, all the back-hallway politics had been done-with most lords content to give the crown to Erland-but



it was a tense day and a half while the issue was in doubt. Why the elder Rodric didn't name an heir I don't know. But when the priests had chased away all the distant kin with no real claim, three men stood before them, Erland, young Rodric, and Guy du Bas-Tyra. The priests asked for their declarations, and each gave them in turn. Rodric and Erland both had solid claims, while Guy was there as a matter of form, as you would have been had you arrived in time."

Arutha interjected dryly, "The time of mourning ensures no western Lord will be King."

Borric threw a disapproving glance at his son, but Kerus said, "Not entirely. If there had been any doubt to the rights of succession, the priest would have held off the ceremony until your father arrived, Arutha. It has been done before."

He looked at Borric and lowered his voice. "As I said, it was expected Erland would take the crown. But when the crown was presented to him, he refused, conceding the claim to Rodric. No one at that time knew of Erland's ill health, so most lords judged the decision a generous approbation of Rodric's claim, as the only son of the King. With Guy du Bas-Tyra's backing the boy, the assembled Congress of Lords ratified his succession. Then the real infighting began, until at last your late wife's uncle was named as King's Regent."

Borric nodded. He remembered the battle over who would be named the then boy King's Regent. His despised cousin Guy had nearly won the position, but Borric's timely arrival and his support of Caldric of Rillanon, along with the support of Duke Brucal of Yabon and Prince Erland, had swung the majority of votes in the congress away from Guy. "For the next five years there was only an occasional border clash with Kesh. Things were quiet. Eight years ago"-Kerus paused to glance around again-"Rodric embarked upon a program of public improvements, as he calls them, upgrading roads and bridges, building dams, and the like. At first they were of little burden, but the taxes have been increased yearly until now the peasants and freemen, even the minor nobles, are being bled white. The King has expanded his programs until now he is rebuilding the entire capital, to make it the greatest city known in the history of man, he says.

"Two years ago a small delegation of nobles came to the King and asked him to abjure this excessive spending and ease the burden upon the people. The King flew into a rage, accused the nobles of being traitors, and had them summarily executed."

Borric's eyes widened. The snow under his boot crunched dryly as he turned suddenly. "We've heard nothing of this in the West!"

"When Erland heard the news, he went immediately to the King and demanded reparation for the families of the nobles who were executed, and a lessening of the taxes. The King-or so it is rumored-was ready to seize his uncle, but was restrained by the few counselors he still trusted. They advised His Majesty that such an act, unheard of in the history of the Kingdom, would surely cause the western lords to rise up against the King."

Borric's expression darkened. "They were right. Had that boy hanged Erland, the Kingdom would have been irretrievably split."

"Since that time the Prince has not set foot in Rillanon, and the

business of the Kingdom is handled by aides, for the two men will not speak to one another."

The Duke looked skyward, and his voice became troubled. "This is much worse than I had heard. Erland told me of the taxes and his refusal to impose them in the West. He said that the King was agreed, for he understood the need of maintaining the garrisons of the North and West."

Kerus slowly shook his head no. "The King agreed only when his aides painted pictures of goblin armies pouring down from the Northlands and plundering the cities of his Kingdom."

"Erland spoke of the strain between himself and his nephew, but even in light of the news I carry, said nothing about His Majesty's actions."

Kerus drew a deep breath and started walking once more. "Borric, I spend so much time with the sycophants of the King's court, I forget that you of the West are given to plain speech." Kerus was silent a moment, then said, "Our King is not the man he once was. Sometimes he seems his old self, laughing and open, filled with grand plans for the Kingdom, other times he is . . . someone else, as if a dark spirit has taken possession of his heart.

"Take care, Borric, for only Erland stands closer to the throne than yourself. Our King is well aware of that fact~even if you never think of it-and sees daggers and poison where none exists."

Silence descended over the group, and Pug saw Borric look openly troubled. Kerus continued. "Rodric fears others covet his crown. That may be, but not those the King suspects. There are only four conDoin males besides the King, all of whom are men of honor." Borric inclined his head at the compliment. "But there are perhaps a dozen more who can claim ties to the throne, through the King's mother and her people. All are eastern lords, and many would not flinch from the opportunity to press their claim to the throne before the Congress of Lords."

Borric looked incensed. "You speak of treason."

"Treason in men's hearts, if not in deeds . . . yet."

"Have things come to such a pass in the East, without us of the West knowing?"

Kerus nodded as they reached the far end of the garden. "Erland is an honorable man, and as such would keep unfounded rumors from his subjects, even yourself. As you have said, it is thirteen years since you last were at Rillanon. All warrants and missives from the King still pass through the Prince's court. How would you know?

"I fear it is only a matter of time before one or other of the King's advisers positions himself over the fallen heads of those of us who hold to our beliefs that the nobility are wardens of the nation's welfare."

Borric said, "Then you risk much with your frank speech."

Duke Kerus shrugged, indicating they should begin their return to the palace. "I have not always been a man to speak my mind, Lord Borric, but these are difficult times. Should anyone else have passed through, there would have been only polite conversation. You are unique, for with the Prince estranged from his nephew, you are the only man in the Kingdom with the strength and rank to possibly influence the King. I do not envy your weighty position, my friend.

"When Rodric the Third was king, I was among the most powerful nobles in the East, but I might as well be a landless freebooter for all the influence I now hold in Rodric the Fourth's court." Kerus paused. "Your black-hearted cousin Guy is now closest to the King, and the Duke of Bas-Tyra and I have little love between us. Our reasons for disliking one another are not as personal as yours. But as his star rises, mine falls even more."

Kerus slapped his hands as the cold was beginning to bite. "But one bit of good news. Guy is wintering at his estate near Pointer's Head, so the King is free of his plotting for the present." Kerus gripped Borric's arm. "Use whatever influence you can muster to stem the King's impulsive nature, Lord Borric, for with this invasion you bring word of, we need to stand united. A lengthy war would drain us of what little reserves we possess, and should the Kingdom be put to the test, I do not know whether it would endure."

Borric said nothing, for even his worst fears since leaving the Prince were surpassed by Kerus's remarks. The Duke of Salador said, "One last thing, Borric. With Erland having refused the crown thirteen years ago, and the rumors of his health failing, many of the Congress of Lords will be looking to you for guidance. where you lead, many will follow, even some of us in the East."

Borric said coldly, "Are you speaking of civil war?"

Kerus waved a hand, a pained expression crossing his face. His eyes seemed moist, as if near tears. "I am ever loyal to the crown, Borric, but if it comes to the right of things, the Kingdom must prevail. No one man is more important than the Kingdom."

Borric said through clenched jaws, "The King is the Kingdom."

Kerus said, "You would not be the man you are and say otherwise. I hope you are able to direct the King's energies toward this trouble in the West, for should the Kingdom be imperiled, others will not hold to such lofty beliefs."

Borric's tone softened a little as they walked up the steps leading from the garden. "I know you mean well, Lord Kerus, and there is only love of the realm in your heart. Have faith and pray, for I will do whatever I can to ensure the survival of the Kingdom."

Kerus stood before the door back into the palace. "I fear we will all be in deep water soon, my lord Borric. I pray that this invasion you speak of will not be the wave that drowns us. In whatever way I can aid you, I will." He turned toward the door, which was opened by a servant. Loudly he said, "I will bid you a good night, for I can see you're all tired."

The tension in the room was heavy as Borric, Arutha, and Pug reentered, and the Duke's mood one of dark reflection. Servants came to show the guests to their rooms, and Pug followed a boy near his own age, dressed in the Duke's livery. Pug looked over his shoulder as they left the hall to see the Duke and his son standing together, speaking quietly to Kulgan.

Pug was shown to a small but elegant room and, ignoring the richness of the bed covers, fell across them still fully clothed. The servant boy said, "Do you need aid in undressing, Squire?"

Pug sat up and looked at the boy with such a frank expression of

wonder that the servant backed away a step. "If that will be all, Squire?" he asked, obviously uncomfortable.

Pug just laughed. The boy stood uncertainly for an instant, then bowed and hurriedly left the room. Pug pulled off his clothing, wondering at the eastern nobles and servants who had to help them undress. He was too tired to fold his garments, simply letting them fall to the floor in a heap.

After blowing out the bedside candle, Pug lay for a time in the darkness, troubled by the evening's discussion. He knew little of court intrigue, but knew that Kerus must have been deeply worried to speak as he did before strangers, in spite of Borric's reputation as a man of high honor.

Pug thought of all the things that had taken place in the last months and knew that his dreams of the King answering the call of Crydee with banners flying were another boyish fancy shattered upon the hard rock of reality.

13

## RILLANON

THE SHIP SAILED into THE harbor.

The climate of the Kingdom Sea was more clement than that of the Bitter Sea, and the journey from Salador had proven uneventful. They'd had to beat a tack much of the way against a steady northeast wind, so three weeks had passed instead of two.

Pug stood on the foredeck of the ship, his cloak pulled tightly around him. The winter wind's bitterness had given way to a softer cool, as if spring were but a few days in coming.

Rillanon was called the jewel of the Kingdom, and Pug judged the name richly deserved. Unlike the squat cities of the West, Rillanon stood a mass of tall spires, gracefully arched bridges, and gently twisting roadways, scattered atop rolling hills in delightful confusion. Upon heroic towers, banners and pennons fluttered in the wind, as if the city celebrated the simple fact of its own existence. To Pug, even the ferrymen who worked the barges going to and from the ships at anchor in the harbor were more colorful for being within the enchantment of Rillanon.

The Duke of Salador had ordered a ducal banner sewn for Borric, and it now flew from the top of the ship's mainmast, informing the officials of the royal city that the Duke of Crydee had arrived. Borric's ship was given priority in docking by the city's harbor pilot, and quickly the ship was being secured at the royal quay. The party disembarked and were met by a company of the Royal Household Guard. At the head of the guards was an old, grey-haired, but still erect man, who greeted Borric warmly.

The two men embraced, and the older man, dressed in the royal purple and gold of the guard but with a ducal signet over his heart, said, "Borric, it is good to see you once more. What has it been? Ten . . . eleven years?"

"Caldric, old friend. It has been thirteen." Borric regarded him fondly. He had clear blue eyes and a short salt-and-pepper beard. The man shook his head and smiled. "It has been much too long." He looked at the others. Spying Pug, he said, "Is this your younger boy?"

Borric laughed. "No, though he would be no shame to me if he were." He pointed out the lanky figure of Arutha. "This is my son. Arutha, come and greet your great-uncle."

Arutha stepped forward, and the two embraced. Duke Caldric, Lord of Rillanon, Knight-General of the King's Royal Household Guard, and Royal Chancellor, pushed Arutha back and regarded him at arm's length. "You were but a boy when I last saw you. I should have known you, for though you have some of your father's looks, you also resemble my dear brother-your mother's father-greatly. You do honor to my family."

Borric said, "Well, old war-horse, how is your city?"

Caldric said, "There is much to speak of, but not here. We shall bring you to the King's palace and quarter you in comfort. We shall have much time to visit. What brings you here to Rillanon?"

"I have pressing business with His Majesty, but it is not something to be spoken of in the streets. Let us go to the palace."

The Duke and his party were given mounts, and the escort cleared away the crowds as they rode through the city. If Krondor and Salador had impressed Pug with their splendor, Rillanon left him speechless.

The island city was built upon many hills, with several small rivers running down to the sea. It seemed to be a city of bridges and canals, as much as towers and spires. Many of the buildings seemed new, and Pug thought that this must be part of the King's plan for rebuilding the city. At several points along the way he saw workers removing old stones from a building, or erecting new walls and roofs. The newer buildings were faced with colorful stonework, many of marble and quartz, giving them a soft white, blue, or pink color. The cobblestones in the streets were clean, and gutters ran free of the clogs and debris Pug had seen in the other cities. Whatever else he might be doing, the boy thought, the King is maintaining a marvelous city.

A river ran before the palace, so that entrance was made over a high bridge that arched across the water into the main courtyard. The palace was a collection of great buildings connected by long halls that sprawled atop a hillside in the center of the city. It was faced with many-colored stone, giving it a rainbow aspect.

As they entered the courtyard, trumpets sounded from the walls, and guards stood to attention. Porters stepped forward to take the mounts, while a collection of palace nobles and officials stood near the palace entrance in welcome.

Approaching, Pug noticed that the greeting given by these men was formal and lacked the personal warmth of Duke Caldric's welcome. As he stood behind Kulkan and Meecham, he could hear Caldric's voice. "My lord Borric, Duke of Crydee, may I present Baron Gray, His Majesty's Steward of the Royal Household." This was a short, plump man in a tight-fitting tunic of red silk, and pale grey hose that bagged at the knees. "Earl Selvee, First Lord of the Royal Navies." A tall, gaunt man

with a thin, waxed mustache bowed stiffly. And so on through the entire company. Each made a short statement of pleasure at Lord Borric's arrival, but Pug felt there was little sincerity in their remarks.

They were taken to their quarters. Kulgan had to raise a fuss to have Meecham near him, for Baron Gray had wanted to send him to the distant servants' wing of the palace, but he relented when Caldric asserted himself as Royal Chancellor.

The room that Pug was shown to far surpassed in splendor anything he had yet seen. The floors were polished marble, and the walls were made from the same material but flecked with what looked to be gold. A great mirror hung in a small room to one side of the sleeping quarters, where a large, gilded bathing tub sat. A steward put his few belongings what they had picked up along the way since their own baggage had -been lost in the forest-in a gigantic closet that could have held a dozen times all that Pug owned. After the man had finished, he inquired, "Shall I ready your bath, sir?"

Pug nodded, for three weeks aboard ship had made his clothes feel as if they were sticking to him. When the bath was ready, the steward said, "Lord Caldric will expect the Duke's party for dinner in four hours' time, sir. Shall I return then?"

Pug said yes, impressed with the man's diplomacy. He knew only that Pug had arrived with the Duke, and left it to Pug to decide whether or not he was included in the dinner invitation.

As he slipped into the warm water, Pug let out a long sigh of relief. He had never been one for baths when he had been a keep boy, preferring to wash away dirt in the sea and the streams near the castle. Now he could learn to enjoy them. He mused about what Tomas would have thought of that. He drifted off in a warm haze of memories, one very pleasant, of a dark-haired, lovely princess, and one sad, of a sandy-haired boy.

THE DINNER of the night before had been an informal occasion, with Duke Caldric hosting Lord Borric's party. Now they stood in the royal throne room waiting to be presented to the King. The hall was vast, a high vaulted affair, with the entire southern wall fashioned of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. Hundreds of nobles stood around as the Duke's party was led down a central aisle between the onlookers.

Pug had not thought it possible to consider Duke Borric poorly dressed, for he had always worn the finest clothing in Crydee, as had his children. But among the finery in evidence around the room, Borric looked like a raven amid a flock of peacocks. Here a pearl-studded doublet, there a gold-thread-embroidered tunic~each noble seemed to be outdoing the next. Every lady wore the costliest silks and brocades, but only slightly outshone the men.

They halted before the throne, and Caldric announced the Duke.

The King smiled, and Pug was struck by a faint resemblance to Arutha, though the King's manner was more relaxed. He leaned forward on his throne and said, "Welcome to our city, cousin. It is good to see Crydee in this hall after so many years."

Borric stepped forward and knelt before Rodric the Fourth, King of

the Kingdom of the Isles. "I am gladdened to see Your Majesty well."  
A brief shadow passed over the monarch's face, then he smiled again.  
"Present to us your companions."

The Duke presented his son, and the King said, "Well, it is true that one of the conDoin line carries the blood of our mother's kin besides ourself." Arutha bowed and backed away. Kulgan was next as one of the Duke's advisers. Meecham, who had no rank in the Duke's court, had stayed in his room. The King said something polite, and Pug was introduced. "Squire Pug of Crydee, Your Majesty, Master of Forest Deep, and member of my court."

The King clapped his hands together and laughed. "The boy who kills trolls. How wonderful. Travelers have carried the tale from the far shores of Crydee, and we would hear it spoken by the author of the brave deed. We must meet later so that you may tell us of this marvel."

Pug bowed awkwardly, feeling a thousand eyes upon him. There had been times before when he had wished the troll story had not been spread, but never so much as now.

He backed away, and the King said, "Tonight we will hold a ball to honor the arrival of our cousin Borric."

He stood, arranging his purple robes around him, and pulled his golden chain of office over his head. A page placed the chain on a purple velvet cushion. The King then lifted his golden crown from his black-tressed head and handed it to another page.

The crowd bowed as he stepped down from his throne. "Come, cousin," he said to Borric, "let us retire to my private balcony, where we can speak without all the rigors of office. I grow weary of the pomp."

Borric nodded and fell in next to the King, motioning Pug and the others to wait. Duke Caldric announced that the day's audience was at an end, and that those with petitions for the King should return the next day.

Slowly the crowd moved out the two great doors at the end of the hall, while Arutha, Kulgan, and Pug stood by. Caldric approached and said, "I will show you to a room where you may wait. It would be well for you to stay close, should His Majesty call for your attendance."

A steward of the court took them through a small door near the one the King had escorted Borric through. They entered a large, comfortable room with a long table in the center laden with fruit, cheese, bread, and wine. At the table were many chairs, and around the edge of the room were several divans, with plump cushions piled upon them.

Arutha crossed over to large glass doors and peered through them. "I can see Father and the King sitting on the royal balcony."

Kulgan and Pug joined him and looked to where Arutha indicated.

The two men were at a table, overlooking the city and the sea beyond. The King was speaking with expansive gestures, and Borric nodded as he listened.

pug said, "I had not expected that His Majesty would look like you, Your Highness."

Arutha replied with a wry smile, "It is not so surprising when you consider that, as my father was cousin to his father, so my mother was cousin to his mother."

Kulgan put his hand on Pug's shoulder. "Many of the noble families

have more than one tie between them Pug. Cousins who are four and five times removed will marry for reasons of politics and bring the families closer again. I doubt there is one noble family in the East that can't claim some relationship to the crown though it may be distant and follow along a twisted route."

They returned to the table, and Pug nibbled at a piece of cheese.

"The King seems in good humor," he said, cautiously approaching the subject all had on their minds.

Kulgan looked pleased at the circumspect manner of the boy's comment, for after leaving Salador, Borric had cautioned them all regarding Duke Kerus's remarks. He had ended his admonition with the old adage, "In the halls of power, there are no secrets, and even the deaf can hear."

Arutha said, "Our monarch is a man of moods; let us hope he stays in a good one after he hears Father's tidings."

The afternoon slowly passed as they awaited word from the Duke.

When the shadows outside had grown long, Borric suddenly appeared at a door. He crossed over to stand before them, a troubled expression on his face. "His Majesty spent most of the afternoon explaining his plans for the rebirth of the Kingdom."

Arutha said, "Did you tell him of the Tsurani?"

The Duke nodded. "He listened and then calmly informed me that he would consider the matter. We will speak again in a day or so was all he said."

Kulgan said, "At least he seemed in good humor."

Borric regarded his old adviser. "I fear too good. I expected some sign of alarm. I do not ride across the Kingdom for minor cause, but he seemed unmoved by what I had to tell him."

Kulgan looked worried. "We are overlong on this journey as it is. Let us hope that His Majesty will not take long in deciding upon a course of action."

Borric sat heavily in a chair and reached for a glass of wine. "Let us hope."

Pug WALKED THROUGH the door to the King's private quarters, his mouth dry with anticipation. He was to have his interview with King Rodric in a few minutes, and he was unsettled to be alone with the ruler of the Kingdom. Each time he had been close to other powerful nobles, he had hidden in the shadow of the Duke or his son, coming forward to tell briefly what he knew of the Tsurani, then able to disappear quickly back into the background. Now he was to be the only guest of the most powerful man north of the Empire of Great Kesh.

A house steward showed him through the door to the King's private balcony. Several servants stood around the edge of the large open veranda, and the King occupied the lone table, a carved marble affair under a large canopy.

The day was clear. Spring was coming early, as winter had before it, and there was a hint of warmth in the gusting air. Below the balcony, past the hedges and stone walls that marked its edge, Pug could see the city of Rillanon and the sea beyond. The colorful rooftops shone brightly in the midday sun, as the last snows had melted completely



over the last four days. Ships sailed in and out of the harbor, and the streets teemed with citizens. The faint cries of merchants and hawkers, shouting over the noise of the streets, floated up to become a soft buzzing where the King took his midday meal.

As Pug approached the table, a servant pulled out a chair. The King turned and said, "Ah! Squire Pug, please take a seat." Pug began a bow, and the King said, "Enough. I don't stand on formality when I dine with a friend."

Pug hesitated, then said, "Your Majesty honors me," as he sat.

Rodric waved the comment away. "I remember what it is to be a boy in the company of men. When I was but a little older than you, I took the crown. Until then I was only my father's son." His eyes got a distant look for a moment. "The Prince, it's true, but still only a boy. My opinion counted for nothing, and I never seemed to satisfy my father's expectations, in hunting, riding, sailing, or swordplay. I took many a hiding from my tutors, Caldric among them. That all changed when I became King, but I still remember what it was like." He turned toward Pug, and the distant expression vanished as he smiled. "And I do wish us to be friends." He glanced away and again his expression turned distant. "One can't have too many friends, now, can one? And since I'm the King, there are so many who claim to be my friend, but aren't." He was silent a moment, then again came out of his reverie. "What do you think of my city?"

Pug said, "I have never seen anything like it, Majesty. It's wonderful."

Rodric looked out across the vista before them. "Yes, it is, isn't it?"

He waved a hand, and a servant poured wine into crystal goblets. Pug sipped at his, he still hadn't developed a taste for wine, but found this very good, light and fruity with a hint of spices. Rodric said, "I have tried very hard to make Rillanon a wonderful place for those who live here. I would have the day come when all the cities of the Kingdom are as fine as this, where everywhere the eye travels, there is beauty. It would take a hundred lifetimes to do that, so I can only set the pattern, building an example for those who follow to imitate. But where I find brick, I leave marble. And those who see it will know it for what it is-my legacy."

The King seemed to ramble a bit, and Pug wasn't sure of all that he was saying as he continued to talk about buildings and gardens and removing ugliness from view. Abruptly the King changed topics. "Tell me how you killed the trolls."

Pug told him, and the King seemed to hang on every word. When the boy had finished, the King said, "That is a wonderful tale. It is better than the versions that have reached the court, for while it is not half so heroic, it is twice as impressive for being true. You have a stout heart, Squire Pug."

Pug said, "Thank you, Majesty."

Rodric said, "In your tale you mentioned the Princess Carline."

"Yes, Majesty?"

"I have not seen her since she was a baby in her mother's arms. What sort of woman has she become?"

Pug found the shift in topic surprising, but said, "She has become a beautiful woman, Majesty, much like her mother. She is bright and

quick, if given to a little temper."

The King nodded. "Her mother was a beautiful woman. If the daughter is half as lovely, she is lovely indeed. Can she reason?"

Pug looked confused. "Majesty?"

"Has she a good head for reason, logic? Can she argue?"

Pug nodded vigorously. "Yes, Your Majesty. The Princess is very good at that."

The King rubbed his hands together. "Good. I must have Borric send her for a visit. Most of these eastern ladies are vapid, without substance. I was hoping Borric gave the girl an education. I would like to meet a young woman who knew logic and philosophy, and could argue and declaim."

Pug suddenly realized what the King had meant by arguing wasn't what he had thought. He decided it best not to mention the discrepancy.

The King continued. "My ministers dun me to seek a wife and give the Kingdom an heir. I have been busy, and frankly, have found little to interest me in the court ladies-oh, they're fine for a moonlight walk and . . . other things. But as the mother of my heirs? I hardly think so. But I should become serious in my search for a queen. Perhaps the only conDoin daughter would be the logical place to start."

Pug began to mention another conDoin daughter, then stifled the impulse, remembering the tension between the King and Anita's father. Besides, the girl was only seven.

The King shifted topics again. "For four days cousin Borric has regaled me with tales of these aliens, these Tsurani. What do you think of all this business?"

Pug looked startled. He had not thought the King might ask him for an opinion on anything, let alone a matter as important as the security of the Kingdom. He thought for a long moment, trying to frame his answer as best he could, then said, "From everything I have seen and heard, Your Majesty, I think these Tsurani people not only are planning to invade, but are already here."

The King raised an eyebrow. "Oh? I would like to hear your reasoning."

Pug considered his words carefully. "If there have been as many sightings as we are aware of, Majesty, considering the stealth these people are employing, wouldn't it be logical that there are many more occurrences of their coming and going than we know of?"

The King nodded. "A good proposition. Continue."

"Then might it also not be true that once the snows have fallen, we are less likely to find signs of them, as they are holding to remote areas?"

Rodric nodded and Pug continued. "If they are as warlike as the Duke and the others have said them to be, I think they have mapped out the West to find a good place to bring their soldiers in during the winter so they can launch their offensive this spring." The

King slapped the table with his hand. "A good exercise in logic, Pug." Motioning for the servants to bring food, he said, "Now, let us eat."

Food of an amazing variety and amount for just the two of them was produced, and Pug picked small amounts of many things, so as not to

appear indifferent to the King's generosity. Rodric asked him a few questions as they dined, and Pug answered as well as he could. As Pug was finishing his meal, the King put his elbow on the table and stroked his beardless chin. He stared out into space for a long time, and Pug began to feel self-conscious, not knowing the proper courtesy toward a king who is lost in thought. He elected to sit quietly. After a time Rodric came out of his reverie. There was a troubled note in his voice as he looked at Pug and said, "Why do these people come to plague us now? There is so much to be done. I can't have war disrupting my plans." He stood and paced around the balcony for a while, leaving Pug standing, for he had risen when the King had. Rodric turned to Pug. "I must send for Duke Guy. He will advise me. He has a good head for such things."

The King paced, looking at the city for a few minutes more, while Pug stood by his chair. He heard the monarch mutter to himself about the great works that must not be interrupted, then felt a tug on his sleeve. He turned and saw a palace steward standing quietly at his side. With a smile and a gesture toward the door, the steward indicated the interview was at an end. Pug followed the man to the door, wondering at the staff's ability to recognize the moods of the King.

Pug was shown the way back to his room, and he asked the servant to carry word to Lord Borric that Pug wished to see him if he was not busy. He went into his room and sat down to think. A short time later he was brought out of his musing by a knock at the door. He gave permission for the caller to enter, and the same steward who had carried the message to the Duke entered, with the message that Borric would see Pug at once.

Pug followed the man from his room and sent him away, saying he could find the Duke's room without guidance. He walked slowly, thinking of what he was going to tell the Duke. Two things were abundantly clear to the boy: the King was not pleased to hear that the Tsurani were a potential threat to his kingdom, and Lord Borric would be equally displeased to hear that Guy du Bas-Tyra was being called to Rillanon.

As with EVERY dinner over the last few days, there was a hushed mood at the table. The five men of Crydee sat eating in the Duke's quarters, with palace servants, all wearing the King's purple-and-gold badge on their dark tunics, hovering nearby.

The Duke was chafing to leave Rillanon for the West. Nearly four months had passed since they left Crydee: the entire winter. Spring was upon them, and if the Tsurani were going to attack, as they all believed, it was only a matter of days now. Arutha's restlessness matched his father's. Even Kulgan showed signs that the waiting was telling upon him. Only Meecham, who revealed nothing of his feelings, seemed content to wait.

Pug also longed for home. He had grown bored in the palace. He wished to be back in his tower with his studies. He also wished to see Carline again, though he didn't speak of this to anyone. Lately he found himself remembering her in a softer light, forgiving those qualities that had once irritated him. He also knew, with mixed feelings of anticipation, that he might discover the fate of Tomas. Dolgan should soon

send word to Crydee, if the thaw came early to the mountains.

Borric had endured several more meetings with the King over the last week, each ending unsatisfactorily as far as he was concerned. The last had been hours ago, but he would say nothing about it until the room was emptied of servants.

As the last dishes were being cleared away, and the servants were pouring the King's finest Keshian brandy, a knock came at the door and Duke Caldric entered, waving the servants outside. When the room was cleared, he turned to the Duke.

"Borric, I am sorry to interrupt your dining, but I have news."

Borric stood, as did the others. "Please join us. Here, take a glass."

Caldric took the offered brandy and sat in Pug's chair, while the boy pulled another over. The Duke of Rillanon sipped his brandy and said, "Messengers arrived less than an hour ago from the Duke of Bas-Tyra. Guy expresses alarm over the possibility that the King might be 'unduly' distressed by these 'rumors' of trouble in the West."

Borric stood and threw his glass across the room, shattering it. Amber fluid dripped down the wall as the Duke of Crydee nearly roared with anger. "What game does Guy play at? What is this talk of rumors and undue distress!"

Caldric raised a hand and Borric calmed a little, sitting again. The old Duke said, "I myself penned the King's call to Guy. Everything you had told, every piece of information and every surmise, was included. I can only think Guy is ensuring that the King reaches no decision until he arrives at the palace."

Borric drummed his fingers on the table and looked at Caldric with anger flashing in his eyes. "what is Bas-Tyra doing? If war comes, it comes to Crydee and Yabon. My people will suffer. My lands will be ravaged."

Caldric shook his head slowly. "I will speak plainly, old friend. Since the estrangement between the King and his uncle, Erland, Guy plays to advance his own banner to primacy in the Kingdom. I think that, should Erland's health fail, Guy sees himself wearing the purple of Krondor."

Through clenched teeth Borric said, "Then hear me clearly, Caldric. I would not put that burden on myself or mine for any but the highest purpose. But if Erland is as ill as I think, in spite of his claims otherwise, it will be Anita who sits the throne in Krondor, not Black Guy. If I have to march the Armies of the West into Krondor and assume the regency myself, that is what shall be, even should Rodric wish it otherwise. Only if the King has issue will another take the western throne."

Caldric looked at Borric calmly. "And will you be branded traitor to the crown?"

Borric slapped the table with his hand. "Curse the day that villain was born. I regret that I must acknowledge him kinsman."

Caldric waited for a minute until Borric calmed down, then said, "I know you better than you know yourself, Borric. You would not raise the war banner of the West against the King, though you might happily strangle your cousin Guy. It was always a sad thing for me that the Kingdom's two finest generals could hate each other so."

"Aye, and with cause. Every time there is a call to aid the West, it is cousin Guy who opposes. Every time there is intrigue and a title is lost, it is one of Guy's favorites who gains. How can you not see? It was only because you, Brucal of Yabon, and I myself held firm that the congress did not name Guy regent for Rodric's first three years. He stood before every Duke in the Kingdom and called you a tired old man who was not fit to rule in the King's name. How can you forget?"

Caldric did look tired and old as he sat in the chair, one hand shading his eyes, as if the room light were too bright. Softly he said, "I do see, and I haven't forgotten. But he also is my kinsman by marriage, and if I were not here, how much more influence do you think he would have with Rodric? As a boy the King idolized him, seeing in him a dashing hero, a fighter of the first rank, a defender of the Kingdom."

Borric leaned back in his chair. "I am sorry, Caldric," he said, his voice losing its harsh edge. "I know you act for the good of us all. And Guy did play the hero, rolling the Keshian Army back at Deep Taunton, all those years ago. I should not speak of things I have not seen firsthand."

Arutha sat passively through all this, but his eyes showed he felt the same anger as his father. He moved forward in his chair, and the dukes looked at him. Borric said, "You have something to say, my son?"

Arutha spread his hands wide before him. "In all this the thought has bothered me: should the Tsurani come, how would it profit Guy to see the King hesitate?"

Borric drummed his fingers on the table. "That is the puzzle, for in spite of his scheming, Guy would not peril the Kingdom, not to spite me."

"Would it not serve him," said Arutha, "to let the West suffer a little, until the issue was in doubt then to come at the head of the Armies of the East, the conquering hero, as he was at Deep Taunton?"

Caldric considered this. "Even Guy could not think so little of these aliens, I would hope."

Arutha paced the room. "But consider what he knows. The ramblings of a dying man. Surmise on the nature of a ship that only Pug, here, has seen, and I caught but a glimpse of as it slid into the sea. Conjecture by a priest and a magician, both callings Guy holds in little regard. Some migrating Dark Brothers. He might discount such news."

"But it is all there for the seeing," protested Borric.

Caldric watched the young Prince pace the room. "Perhaps you are right. What may be lacking is the urgency of your words, an urgency lacking in the dry message of ink and parchment. When he arrives, we must convince him."

Borric nearly spat his words. "It is for the King to decide, not Guy!"

Caldric said, "But the King has given much weight to Guy's counsel. If you are to gain command of the Armies of the West, it is Guy who must be convinced."

Borric looked shocked. "I? I do not want the banner of the armies. I only wish for Erland to be free to aid me, should there be need."

Caldric placed both hands upon the table. "Borric, for all your wisdom, you are much the rustic noble. Erland cannot lead the armies. He is not well. Even if he could, the King would not allow it. Nor would he

give leave for Erland's Marshal, Dulanic. You have seen Rodric at his best, of late. When the black moods are upon him, he fears for his life. None dare say it, but the King suspects his uncle of plotting for the crown."

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed Borric. "The crown was Erland's for the asking thirteen years ago. There was no clear succession. Rodric's father had not yet named him heir apparent, and Erland's claim was as clear as the King's, perhaps more so. Only Guy and those who sought to use the boy pressed Rodric's claim. Most of the congress would have sustained Erland as King."

"I know, but times are different, and the boy is a boy no longer. He is now a frightened young man who is sick from fear. Whether it is due to Guy's and the others' influence or from some illness of the mind, I do not know. The King does not think as other men do. No king does, and Rodric less than most. Ridiculous as it may seem, he will not give the Armies of the West to his uncle. I am also afraid that once Guy has his ear, he will not give them to you either."

Borric opened his mouth to say something, but Kulgan interrupted.

"Excuse me, Your Graces, but may I suggest something?"

Caldric looked at Borric, who nodded. Kulgan cleared his throat and said, "Would the King give the Armies of the West to Duke Brucal of Yabon?"

Comprehension slowly dawned on Borric's and Caldric's faces, until the Duke of Crydee threw back his head and laughed. Slamming his fist on the table, he nearly shouted, "Kulgan! If you had not served me well in all the years I have known you, tonight you have." He turned to Caldric. "What do you think?"

Caldric smiled for the first time since entering the room. "Brucal?"

That old war dog? There is no more honest man in the Kingdom. And he is not in the line of succession. He would be beyond even Guy's attempts to discredit. Should he receive the command of the armies

Arutha finished the thought. "He would call Father to be his chief adviser. He knows Father is the finest commander in the West."

Caldric sat up straight in his chair, excitement on his face. "You would even have command of the armies of Yabon."

"Yes," said Arutha, "and LaMut, ZUn, Ylith, and the rest."

Caldric stood. "I think it will work. Say nothing to the King tomorrow.

I will find the proper time to make the 'suggestion.' Pray that His Majesty approves."

Caldric took his leave, and Pug could see that for the first time there was hope for a good ending to this journey. Even Arutha, who had fumed like black thunder all week, looked nearly happy.

Pug WAS AWAKENED by a pounding on his door. He sleepily called out for whoever was out there to enter, and the door opened. A royal steward Walked in. "Sir, the King commands all in the Duke's party to join him in the throne room. At once." He held a lantern for Pug's convenience. Pug said he would come straight away and hurriedly got dressed.

Outside it was still dark, and he felt anxious about what had caused this surprise summons. The hopeful feeling of the night before, after Caldric

had left, was replaced by a gnawing worry that the unpredictable King had somehow learned of the plan to circumvent the arrival of the Duke of Bas-Tyra.

He was still buckling his belt about his tunic when he left his room. He hurried down the hall, with the steward beside him holding a lantern against the dark, as the torches and candles usually lit in the evening had all been extinguished.

When they reached the throne room, the Duke, Arutha, and Kulgan were arriving, all looking apprehensively toward Rodric, who paced by his throne, still in his night-robes. Duke Caldric stood to one side, a grave expression on his face. The room was dark, save for the lanterns carried by the stewards.

As soon as they were gathered before the throne, Rodric flew into a rage. "Cousin! Do you know what I have here?" he screamed, holding out a sheaf of parchment.

Borric said he didn't. Rodric's voice lowered only a little. "It is a message from Yabon! That old fool Brucal has let those Tsurani aliens attack and destroy one of his garrisons. Look at these!" he nearly shrieked, throwing the parchments toward Borric. Kulgan picked them up and handed them to the Duke. "Never mind," said the King, his voice returning to near-normalcy. "I'll tell you what they say.

"These invaders have attacked into the Free Cities, near Walinor. They have attacked into the elven forests. They have attacked Stone Mountain. They have attacked Crydee."

Without thinking, Borric said, "What news from Crydee?"

The King stopped his pacing. He looked at Borric, and for a moment Pug saw madness in his eyes. He closed them briefly, then opened them, and Pug could see the King was himself again. He shook his head slightly and raised his hand to his temple. "I have only secondhand news from Brucal. When those messages left six weeks ago, there had only been one attack at Crydee. Your son Lyam reports the victory was total, driving the aliens deep into the forest."

Caldric stepped forward. "All reports say the same thing. Heavily armed companies of foot soldiers attacked during the night, before the snows had melted, taking the garrisons by surprise. Little is known save that a garrison of LaMutians near Stone Mountain was overrun. All other attacks seem to have been driven back." He looked at Borric meaningfully. "There is no word of the Tsurani's using cavalry."

Borric said, "Then perhaps Tully was right, and they have no horses."

The King seemed to be dizzy, for he took a staggering step backward and sat on his throne. Again he placed a hand to his temple, then said, "what is this talk of horses? My Kingdom is invaded. These creatures dare to attack my soldiers."

Borric looked at the King. "What would Your Majesty have me do?"

The King's voice rose. "Do? I was going to wait for my loyal Duke of Bas-Tyra to arrive before I made any decision. But now I must act."

He paused, and his face took on a vulpine look, as his dark eyes gleamed in the lantern light. "I was considering giving the Armies of the West to Brucal, but the doddering old fool can't even protect his own garrisons."

Borric was about to protest on Brucal's behalf, but Arutha, knowing

his father, gripped his arm, and the Duke remained silent. The King said, "Borric, you must leave Crydee to your son. He is capable enough, I should think. He's given us our only victory so far." His eyes wandered and he giggled. He shook his head for a moment, and his voice lost its frantic edge. "Oh, gods, these pains. I think my head will burst." He closed his eyes briefly. "Borric, leave Crydee to Lyam and Arutha; I'm giving you the banner of the Armies of the West; go to Yabon. Brucal is sorely pressed, for most of the alien army strikes toward LaMut and ZUn. When you are there, request what you need. These invaders must be driven from our lands." The King's face was pale, and perspiration gleamed on his forehead. "This is a poor hour to start, but I have sent word to the harbor to ready a ship. You must leave at once. Go now." The Duke bowed and turned. Caldric said, "I will see His Majesty to his room. I will accompany you to the docks when you are ready." The old Chancellor helped the King from the throne, and the Duke's party left the hall. They rushed back to their rooms to find stewards already packing their belongings. Pug stood around excitedly, for at last he was returning to his home.

THEY stOOD at dockside, bidding farewell to Caldric. Pug and Meecham waited, and the tall franklin said, "Well, lad. It will be some time before we see home again, now that war is joined." Pug looked up into the scarred face of the man who had found him in the storm, so long ago. "Why? Aren't we going home?" Meecham shook his head. "The Prince will ship from Krondor through the Straits of Darkness to join his brother, but the Duke will ship for Ylith then to Brucal's camp somewhere near LaMut. Where Lord Borric goes, Kulgan goes. And where my master goes, I go. And you?" Pug felt a sinking in his stomach. What the franklin said was true. He belonged with Kulgan, not with the folk at Crydee, though he knew if he asked, he would be allowed to go home with the Prince. He resigned himself to another sign that his boyhood was ending. "Where Kulgan goes, I go." Meecham clapped him on the shoulder and said, "Well, at least I can teach you to use that bloody sword you swing like a fishwife's broom." Feeling little cheer at the prospect, Pug smiled weakly. They soon boarded the ship and were under way toward Salador, and the first leg of the long journey west.

14

## INVASION

THE SPRING RAINS WERE HEAVY THAT year. The business of war was hampered by the ever-present mud. It would stay wet and cold for nearly another month before the brief, hot summer came. Duke Brucal of Yabon and Lord Borric stood looking over a table laden with maps. The rain hammered on the roof of the tent, the



central part of the commander's pavilion. On either side of the tent two others were attached, providing sleeping quarters for the two nobles. The tent was filled with smoke, from lanterns and from Kulgan's pipe. The magician had proven an able adviser to the dukes, and his magical aid helpful. He could detect trends in the weather, and his wizard's sight could detect some of the Tsurani's troop movements, though not often. And over the years his reading of every book he encountered, including narratives of warfare, had made him a fair student of tactics and strategy.

Brucal pointed to the newest map on the table. "They have taken this point here, and another here. They hold this point"-he indicated another spot on the map-"in spite of our every effort to dislodge them. They also seem to be moving along a line from here, to here." His finger swept down a line along the eastern face of the Grey Towers. "There is a coordinated pattern here, but I'm damned if I can anticipate where it's going next." The old Duke looked weary. The fighting had been going on sporadically for over two months now, and no distinct advantage could be seen on either side.

Borric studied the map. Red spots marked known Tsurani strongholds: hand-dug, earthen breastworks, with a minimum of two hundred men defending. There were also suspected reinforcement companies, their approximate location indicated with yellow spots. It was known that any position attacked was quick to get reinforcements, sometimes in a matter of minutes. Blue spots indicated the location of Kingdom pickets, though most of Brucal's forces were billeted around the hill upon which the commander's tent sat.

Until the heavy foot soldiers and engineers from Ylith and Tyr-Sog arrived to man and create permanent fortifications, the Kingdom was fighting a principally mobile war, for most of the troops assembled were cavalry. The Duke of Crydee agreed with the other man's assessment. "It seems their tactics remain the same: bring in a small force, dig in, and hold. They prevent our troops from entering, but refuse to follow when we withdraw. There is a pattern. But for the life of me, I can't see it either."

A guard entered. "My lords, an elf stands without, seeking entrance." Brucal said, "Show him in."

The guard held aside the tent flap, and an elf entered. His red-brown hair was plastered to his head, and his cloak dripped water on the floor of the tent. He made a slight bow to the dukes. .

"What news from Elvandar?" Borric asked.

"My queen sends you greetings." He quickly turned to the map. He pointed at the pass between the Grey Towers on the south and Stone Mountain on the north, the same pass Borric's forces now bottled up at its east end. "The outworlders move many soldiers through this pass. They have advanced to the edge of the elven forests, but seek not to enter. They have made it difficult to get through." He grinned. "I led several a merry chase for half a day. They run nearly as well as the dwarves. But they could not keep up in the forest." He returned his attention to the map. "There is word from Crydee that skirmishes have been fought by outriding patrols but nothing close to the castle itself. There is no word of activity from the Grey Towers, Carse,

or Tulan. They seem content to dig in along this pass. Your forces to the west will not be able to join you, for they could not break through now."

"How strong do the aliens appear to be?" asked Brucal.

"It is not known, but I saw several thousand along this route." His finger indicated a route along the northern edge of the pass, from the elven forests to the Kingdom camp. "The dwarves of Stone Mountain are left alone, so long as they do not venture south. The outworlders deny them the pass also."

Borric asked the elf, "Has there been any report of the Tsurani's having cavalry?"

"None. Every report refers only to infantry."

Kulgan said, "Father Tully's speculation on their being horseless seems to be borne out."

Brucal took brush and ink in hand and entered the information on the map. Kulgan stood looking over his shoulder.

Borric said to the elf, "After you've rested, carry my greetings to your mistress, and my wish for her good health and prosperity. If you should send runners to the west, please carry the same message to my sons."

The elf bowed. "As my lord wishes. I shall return to Elvandar at once." He turned and left the tent.

Kulgan said, "I think I see it." He pointed to the new red spots on the map.

They formed a rough half circle, through the pass. "The Tsurani are trying to hold this area here. That valley is the center of the circle. I would guess they are attempting to keep anyone from getting close."

Both the dukes looked puzzled. Borric said, "But to what purpose?"

There is nothing there of any value militarily. It is as if they are inviting us to bottle them up in that valley."

Suddenly Brucal gasped. "It's a bridgehead. Think of it in terms of crossing a river. They have a foothold on this side of the rift, as the magician calls it. They have only as many supplies as their men can carry through. They don't have enough control of the area for foraging, so they need to expand the area under their control and build up supplies before they launch an offensive."

Brucal turned to the magician. "Kulgan, what do you think? This is more in your province."

The magician looked at the map as if trying to divine information hidden in it. "We know nothing of the magic involved. We don't know how fast they can pass supplies and men through, for no one has ever witnessed an appearance. They may require a large area, which this valley provides them. Or they may have some limit on the amount of time available to pass troops through."

Duke Borric considered this. "Then there is only one thing to do. We must send a party into the valley to see what they are doing."

Kulgan smiled. "I will go too, if Your Grace permits. Your soldiers might not have the faintest idea of what they are seeing if it involves magic."

Brucal started to object, his gaze taking in the magician's ample size.

Borric cut him off. "Don't let his look fool you. He rides like a trooper."

He turned to Kulgan. "You had best take Pug, for if one should fall, then the other can carry the news."

Kulgan looked unhappy at that, but saw the wisdom in it. The Duke of Yabon said, "If we strike at the North Pass, then into this valley and draw their forces there, a small, fast company might break through here." He pointed at a small pass that entered the south end of the valley from the east.

Borric said, "It is a bold enough plan. We have danced with the Tsurani so long, holding a stable front, I doubt they will expect it." The magician suggested they retire for the rest of the evening, for it would be a long day on the morrow. He closed his eyes briefly, then informed the two leaders that the rain would stop and the next day would be fine.

Puc LAY WRAPPED in a blanket, trying to nap, when Kulgan entered their tent. Meecham sat before the cook fire, preparing the evening meal and attempting to keep it from the greedy maw of Fantus. The firedrake had sought out his master a week before, eliciting startled cries from the soldiers as he swooped over the tents. Only Meecham's commanding shouts had kept a Bowman from putting a cloth-yard arrow into the playful drake. Kulgan had been pleased to see his pet, but at a loss to explain how the creature had found them. The drake had moved right into the magician's tent, content to sleep next to Pug and steal food from under Meecham's watchful eye.

Pug sat up as the magician pulled off his sopping cloak. "There is an expedition going deep within Tsurani-held territory, to break the circle they've thrown up around a small valley and find out what they are up to. You and Meecham will be going with me on this trip, I would have friends at my back and side."

Pug felt excited by the news. Meecham had spent long hours schooling him in use of sword and shield, and the old dream of soldiering had returned. "I have kept my blade sharp, Kulgan."

Meecham gave forth a snort that passed for laughter, and the magician threw him a black look. "Good, Pug. But with any luck we'll not be fighting. We are to go in a smaller force attached to a larger one that will draw off the Tsurani. We will drive quickly into their territory and discover what they are hiding. We will then ride as fast as possible to bring back the news. I thank the gods they are without horses, or we could never hope to accomplish so bold a stroke. We shall ride through them before they know we have struck."

"Perhaps we may take a prisoner," the boy said hopefully.

"It would be a change," said Meecham. The Tsurani had proved to be fierce fighters, preferring to die rather than be captured.

"Maybe then we'd discover why they've come to Midkemia," ventured Pug.

Kulgan looked thoughtful. "There is little we understand about these Tsurani. Where is this place they come from? How do they cross between their world and ours? And as you've pointed out, the most vexing question of all, why do they come? Why invade our lands?"

"Metal."

Kulgan and Pug looked over at Meecham, who was spooning up stew, keeping one eye on Fantus. "They don't have any metal and they want ours." When Kulgan and Pug regarded him with blank expressions, he shook his head. "I'd thought you puzzled it out by now, so I didn't

think to bring it up." He put aside the bowls of stew, reached behind himself, and drew a bright red arrow out from under his bedding. "Souvenir," he said, holding it out for inspection. "Look at the head. It's the same stuff their swords are made from, some kind of wood, hardened like steel. I picked over a lot of things fetched in by the soldiers, and I haven't seen one thing these Tsurani make with any metal in it." Kulgan looked flabbergasted. "Of course! It's all so simple. They found a way to pass between their world and ours, sent through scouts, and found a land rich in metals they lack. So they sent in an invading army. It also explains why they marshal in a high valley of the mountains, rather than in the lower forests. It gives them free access to . . . the dwarven mines!" He jumped up. "I'd better inform the dukes at once. We must send word to the dwarves to be alert for incursions into the mines."

Pug sat thoughtfully as Kulgan vanished through the tent entrance. After a moment he said, "Meecham, why didn't they try trading?" Meecham shook his head. "The Tsurani? From what I've seen, boy, it's a good bet trading never entered their minds. They are one very warlike bunch. Those bastards fight like six hundred kinds of demons. If they had cavalry, they would have chased this whole lot back to LaMut, then probably burned the city down around them. But if we can wear them down, like a bulldog does just keep hanging on until they tire, we might settle this after a time. Look what happened to Kesh. Lost half of Bosnia to the Kingdom in the north 'cause the Confederacy just plain wore the Empire out with one rebellion after another in the south." After a time, Pug gave up on Kulgan's returning soon, ate supper alone, and made ready for bed. Meecham quit trying to keep the magician's meal away from the drake, and also turned in.

In the dark, Pug lay staring up at the tent roof, listening to the sound of the rain and the drake's joyous chewing. Soon he drifted off into sleep, where he dreamed of a dark tunnel and a flickering light vanishing down it.

THE trEEs were thick and the air hung heavy with mist as the column moved slowly through the forest. Outriders came and went every few minutes, checking for signs that the Tsurani were preparing an ambush. The sun was lost high in the trees overhead, and the entire scene had a greyish-green quality to it, making it difficult to see more than a few yards ahead. At the head of the column rode a young captain of the LaMutian army, Vandros, son of the old Earl of LaMut. He was also one of the more level-headed and capable young officers in Brucal's army. They rode in pairs, with Pug sitting next to a soldier, behind Kulgan and Meecham. The order to halt came down the line, and Pug reined in his horse and dismounted. Over a light gambeson, he wore a well-oiled suit of chain mail. Over that was a tabard of the LaMutian forces, with the grey wolf's head on a circle of blue in the center. Heavy woolen trousers were tucked into his high boots. He had a shield on his left ' arm, and his sword hung from his belt, he felt truly a soldier. The only discordant note was his helm, which was a little too large and gave him a slightly comic appearance. Captain Vandros came back to where Kulgan stood waiting, and dismounted. "The scouts have spotted a camp about half a mile ahead. They think they were not seen by

the guards." The captain pulled out a map. "We are about here. I will lead my men and attack the enemy position. Cavalry from Zun will support us on either side. Lieutenant Garth will command the column you will ride with. You will pass the enemy camp and continue on toward the mountains. We will try to follow if we can, but if we haven't rejoined you by sundown, you must continue alone. "Keep moving, if only at a slow walk. Push the horses, but try to keep them alive. On horseback you can always outrun these aliens, but on foot I wouldn't give you much chance of getting back. They run like demons. "Once in the mountains, move through the pass. Ride into the valley one hour after sunrise. The North Pass will be attacked at dawn, so if you get safely into the valley you should, I hope, find little between you and the North Pass. Once in the valley, don't stop for anything. If a man falls, he is to be left. The mission is to get information back to the commanders. Now try to rest. It may be your last chance for some time. We attack in an hour." He walked his horse back to the head of the line. Kulgan, Meecham, and Pug sat without speaking. The magician wore no armor because he claimed it would interfere with his magic. Pug was more inclined to believe it would interfere with his considerable girth. Meecham had a sword at his side, like the others, but held a horse bow. He preferred archery to close fighting, though Pug knew, from long hours of instruction at his hands, that he was no stranger to the blade. The hour passed slowly, and Pug felt mounting excitement, for he was still possessed by boyish notions of glory. He had forgotten the terror of the fighting with the Dark Brothers before they reached the Grey Towers. Word was passed and they remounted. They rode slowly at first, until the Tsurani were in sight. As the trees thinned, they picked up speed, and when they reached the clearing, they galloped the horses. Large breastworks of earth had been thrown up as a defense against the charge of horsemen. Pug could see the brightly colored helmets of the Tsurani rushing to defend their camp. As the riders charged, the sounds of fighting could be heard echoing through the trees as the Zunese troops engaged other Tsurani camps. The ground shook under the horses as they rode straight at the camp, sounding like a rolling wave of thunder. The Tsurani soldiers stayed behind the earthworks, shooting arrows, most of which fell short. As the first element of the column hit the earthworks, the second element turned to the left, riding off at an angle past the camp. A few Tsurani soldiers were outside the breastworks here, and were ridden down like wheat before a scythe. Two came close to hitting the riders with the great two-handed swords they wielded, but their blows went wide. Meecham, guiding his horse with his legs, dropped both with two quick arrows. Pug heard a horse scream among the sounds of the fighting behind, then suddenly found himself crashing through the brush as they entered the forest. They rode as hard as possible, cutting through the trees, ducking under low branches, the scene a passing kaleidoscope of greens and browns. The column rode for nearly a half hour, then slackened pace as the horses began to tire. Kulgan called to Lieutenant Garth, and they halted to check their position against the map. If they moved slowly for the balance of the day and night, they would reach the mouth of the pass near daybreak. " Meecham peered over the heads of the lieutenant and Kulgan as they -knelt on the ground. "I know this place. I hunted it as a boy, when I lived near %Hnsh." Pug was startled. This was the first time Meecham had ever mentioned anything about his past.

Pug had supposed that Meecham was from Crydee, and was surprised to find he had been a youth in the Free Cities. But then he found it difficult to imagine Meecham as a boy. The franklin continued. "There is a way over the crest of the mountains, a path that leads between two smaller peaks. It is little more than a goat trail, but if we led the horses all night, we could be in the valley by sunrise. This way is difficult to find on this side if you don't know where to seek it. From the valley side, it is nearly impossible. I would bet the Tsurani know nothing about it." The lieutenant regarded Kulgan with a question in his eyes. The magician looked at Meecham, then said, "It might be worth a try. We can mark our trail for Vandros. If we move slowly, he might catch up before we reach the valley." "All right," said the lieutenant, "our biggest advantage is mobility, so let's keep moving. Meecham, where will we come out?" The large man leaned over the lieutenant's shoulder to point at a spot on the map near the south end of the valley. "Here. If we come out straight west for a half mile or so, then swing north, we can cut down the heart of the valley." He motioned with his finger as he spoke. "This valley's mostly woods at the north and south end, with a big meadow in the middle. That's where they'd be if they have a big camp. It's mostly open there, so if the aliens haven't come up with anything surprising, we should be able to ride right by them afore they can organize to stop us. The dicey part will be getting through the northern woods if they've garrisoned soldiers there. But if we get through them, we'll be free to the North Pass."

"All agreed?" asked the lieutenant.

When no one said anything, he gave orders for the men to walk their horses, and Meecham took the lead as guide. They reached the entrance to the pass, or what Pug thought Meecham had correctly called a goat trail, an hour before sundown. The lieutenant posted guards and ordered the horses unsaddled. Pug rubbed down his horse with handfuls of long grass, then staked it out. The thirty soldiers were busy tending to their horses and armor. Pug could feel the tension in the air. The run around the Tsurani camp had set the soldiers on edge, and they were anxious for a fight. Meecham showed Pug how to muffle his sword and shield with rags torn from the soldiers' blankets. "We're not going to be using these bed rolls this night, and nothing will ring through the hills like the sound of metal striking metal, boy. Except maybe the clapping of hooves on the rock." Pug watched as he muffled the horses' hooves with leather stockings designed for just this purpose and carried in the saddlebags. Pug rested as the sun began to set. Through the short spring twilight, he waited until he heard the order to resaddle. The soldiers were beginning to pull their horses into a line when he finished. Meecham and the lieutenant were walking down the line repeating instructions to the men. They would move in single file, Meecham taking the lead, the lieutenant second, down the line to the last soldier. They tied a series of ropes through the left stirrup of each horse, and each man gripped it tightly as he led his own horse. After everyone was in position, Meecham started off. The path rose steeply and the horses had to scramble in places. In the darkness they moved slowly, taking great care not to stray from the path. Occasionally Meecham stopped the line, to check ahead. After several such stops, the trail crested through a deep, narrow pass and started downward. An hour later it widened, and they stopped to rest. Two soldiers were sent ahead with Meecham to

scout the way, while the rest of the tired line dropped to the ground to ease cramped legs. Pug realized the fatigue was as much the result of the tension created by the silent passage as of the climbing, but it didn't make his legs feel any better. After what seemed to be much too short a rest they were moving again. Pug stumbled along, fatigue numbing his mind to the point where the world became an endless series of picking up one foot and placing it before the other. Several times the horse before him was literally towing him as he grasped the rope tied to its stirrup. Suddenly Pug was aware that the line had stopped and that they were standing in a gap between two small hills, looking down at the valley floor. From here it would take only a few minutes to ride down the slope. Kulgan walked back to where the boy stood next to his animal. The stout wizard seemed little troubled by the climb, and Pug wondered at the muscle that must lie hidden beneath the layers of fat. "How are you feeling, Pug?" "I'll live, I expect, but I think next time I'll ride, if it's all the same to you." They were keeping their voices low, but the magician gave out with a soft chuckle anyway. "I understand completely. We'll be staying here until first light. That will be slightly less than two hours. I suggest you get some sleep, for we have a great deal of hard riding ahead." Pug nodded and lay down without a word. He used his shield for a pillow and, before the magician had taken a step away, was fast asleep. He never stirred as Meecham came and removed the leather muffles from his horse.

A gENTlE sHAKING brought Pug awake. He felt as if he had just closed his eyes a moment before. Meecham was squatting before him, holding something out. "Here, boy. Eat this."

Pug took the offered food. It was soft bread, with a nutty flavor. After two bites he began to feel better.

Meecham said, "Eat quickly, we're off in a few minutes." He moved forward to where the lieutenant and the magician stood by their horses.

Pug finished the bread and remounted. The soreness had left his legs, and by the time he was astride his mount, he felt anxious to be off.

The lieutenant turned his horse and faced the men. "We will ride west-then, on my command, north. Fight only if attacked. Our mission is to return with information about the Tsurani. If any man falls, we cannot stop. If you are separated from the others, get back as best you can. Remember as much of what you see as possible, for you may be the only one to carry the news to the dukes. May the gods protect us all.

Several of the soldiers uttered quick prayers to various deities, chiefly Tith, the war god, then they were off. The column came down the hillside and reached the flat of the valley. The sun was cresting the hills behind, and a rosy glow bathed the landscape. At the foot of the hills they crossed a small creek and entered a plain of tall grass. Far ahead was a stand of trees, and another could be seen off to the north. At the north end of the valley the haze of campfire smoke hung in the air. The enemy was there all right, thought Pug, and from the volume of smoke there must be a large concentration of them. He hoped Meecham was right and they were all garrisoned out in the open, where the Kingdom soldiers stood a fair chance of outrunning them.

After a while the lieutenant passed the word, and the column turned

north. They trotted along, saving the horses for when they would be sure to need the speed.

Pug thought he saw glimpses of color in the trees ahead, as they descended into the southern woods of the valley, but couldn't be sure.

As they reached the woods, a shout went up from within the trees. The lieutenant cried, "All right, they've seen us. Ride hard and stay close."

He spurred his horse forward, and soon the entire company was thundering through the woods. Pug saw the horses in front bear to the left and turned his to follow, seeing a clearing in the trees. The sound of voices grew louder as the first trees went flying past, and his eyes tried to adjust to the darkness of the woods. He hoped his horse could see more clearly than he could, or he might find himself inside a tree.

The horse, battle trained and quick, darted between the trunks, and Pug could begin to see flashes of color among the branches. Tsurani soldiers were rushing to intercept the horsemen, but were forced to weave through the trees, making it impossible. They were speeding through the woods faster than the Tsurani could pass the word and react. Pug knew that this advantage of surprise couldn't last much longer, they were making too great a commotion for the enemy not to realize what was happening.

After a mad dash through the trees, they broke into another clear area where a few Tsurani soldiers stood waiting for them. The horsemen charged, and most of the defenders scattered to avoid being run down. One, however, stood his ground, in spite of the terror written on his face, and swung the blue two-handed sword he carried. A horse screamed, and the rider was thrown as the blade cut the horse's right leg from under him. Pug lost sight of the fight as he sped quickly past.

An arrow shot over Pug's shoulder, buzzing like an angry bee. He hunched over the withers of his mount, trying to give the archers behind him as small a target as possible. Ahead, a soldier fell backward out of his saddle, a red arrow through his neck.

Soon they were out of bow range and riding toward a breastwork thrown across an old road from the mines in the south. Hundreds of brightly colored figures scurried behind it. The lieutenant signaled for the riders to pass around it, to the west.

As soon as it was apparent they would pass the earthwork and not charge it, several Tsurani bowmen came tumbling over the top of the redoubt and ran to intercept the riders. As soon as they came within bowshot, the air filled with red and blue shafts. Pug heard a horse scream, but he couldn't see the stricken animal or its rider.

Riding quickly beyond the range of the bowmen, they entered another thick stand of trees. The lieutenant pulled up his mount for a moment and yelled, "From here on, make straight north. We're almost to the meadow, so there'll be no cover, and speed is your only ally. Then once you're in the woods to the north, keep moving. Our forces should have broken through up there, and if we can get past those woods, we should be all right." Meecham had described the woods as being about two or three miles across. From there it was three miles of open ground until the North Pass through the hills began.

They slowed to a walk, trying to rest the horses as much as possible. They could see the tiny figures of the Tsurani coming from behind, but



they would never catch up before the horses were running again. Ahead Pug could see the trees of the forest, looming larger with each passing minute. He could feel the eyes that must be there, watching them, waiting.

"As soon as we are within bowshot, ride as fast as you can," shouted the lieutenant. Pug saw the soldiers pull their swords and bows out, and drew his own sword. Feeling uncomfortable with the weapon clutched in his right hand, he rode at a trot toward the trees.

Suddenly the air was filled with arrows. Pug felt one glance off his helm, but it still snapped his head back and brought tears to his eyes. He urged his horse ahead blindly, trying to blink his eyes clear. He had the shield in his left hand and a sword in his right, so that by the time he blinked enough to be able to see clearly he found himself in the woods. His war-horse responded to leg pressure as he moved into the forest.

A yellow-garbed soldier burst from behind a tree and aimed a swing at the boy. He caught the sword blow on his shield, which sent a numbing shock up his left arm. He swung overhand and down at the soldier, who leaped away, and the blow missed. Pug spurred his horse on, before the soldier could get in position to swing again. All around, the forest rang with the sounds of battle. He could barely make out the other horsemen among the trees.

Several times he rode down Tsurani soldiers as they tried to block his passage. Once one tried to grab at the reins of the horse, but Pug sent him reeling with a blow on the potlike helmet. To Pug it seemed as if they were all engaged in some mad game of hide-and-go-seek, with foot soldiers jumping out from behind every other tree.

A sharp pain stung Pug on the right cheek. Feeling with the back of his sword hand as he bounded through the wood, he felt a wetness, and when he pulled his hand away, he could see blood on his knuckles. He felt a detached curiosity. He hadn't even heard the arrow that had stung him.

Twice more he rode down soldiers, the war-horse knocking them aside. Suddenly he burst out of the forest and was assaulted by a kaleidoscope of images. He pulled up for a moment and let the scene register.

Less than a hundred yards to the west of where he exited the woodlands, a great device, some hundred feet in length, with twenty-foot-high poles at each end, stood. Around it were clustered several men, the first Tsurani Pug had seen who weren't wearing armor. These men wore long black robes and were completely unarmed. Between the poles a shimmering grey haze like the one they had seen in Kulgan's room filled the air, blocking out the view of the area directly behind.

From out of the haze a wagon was being pulled by two grey, squat, six-legged beasts, who were prodded by two soldiers in red armor. Several more wagons were standing beyond the machines, and a few of the strange beasts could be seen grazing beyond the wagons.

Beyond the strange device, a mighty camp sprawled across the meadow, with more tents than Pug could count. Banners of strange design and gaudy colors fluttered in the wind above them, and the rising smoke of the campfires stung his nose with acrid pungency as it

was carried off in the breeze.

More riders were coming through the trees, and Pug spurred his horse forward, angling away from the strange device. The six-legged beasts raised their heads and ambled away from the oncoming horses, seeming to move with little more than the minimum effort required to take them out of the path of the riders.

One of the black-robed men ran toward the riders. He stopped and stood off to one side as they sped past. Pug got a glimpse of his face, clean shaven, his lips moving and eyes fixed on something behind the boy. Pug heard a yell and, looking back, saw a rider on the ground, his horse rooted in place, like a statue. Several guards were rushing over to subdue the man when the boy turned away. Once beyond the strange device, he could see a series of large, brightly colored tents off to the left. Ahead, the way was clear.

Pug caught sight of Kulgan and reined his horse to bring himself closer to the magician. Thirty yards to the right, Pug could see other riders. As they dashed away, Kulgan shouted something at the boy that he couldn't make out. The magician pointed at the side of his face, then at Pug, who realized the mage was asking if he was all right. Pug waved his sword and smiled, and the magician smiled back.

Suddenly, about a hundred yards in front, a loud buzzing noise filled the air, and a black-robed man appeared, as if from thin air. Kulgan's horse bore straight for him, but the man had a queer-looking device in his hand that he pointed at the magician.

The air sizzled with energy. Kulgan's horse screamed and fell as if poleaxed. The fat magician was tossed over the horse's head and tucked his shoulder under as he hit the ground. With an amazing display of agility he rolled up onto his feet and bowled over the black-robed man. Pug pulled up in spite of the order to keep going. He reined his horse around and charged back to find the magician sitting astride the chest of the smaller man, each grasping the left wrist of the other with his right hand. Pug could see that they were locked eye to eye in a contest of wills. Kulgan had explained this strange mental power to Pug before. It was a way in which a magician could bend the will of another to his own. It took great concentration and was very dangerous. Pug leaped from his own mount and rushed over to where the two men were locked in struggle. With the flat of his sword, he struck the black-robed figure on the temple. The man slumped unconscious.

Kulgan staggered to his feet. "Thank you, Pug. I don't think I could have bettered him. I've never encountered such mental strength." Kulgan looked to where his horse lay quivering on the ground. "It's useless."

Turning to Pug, he said, "Listen well, for you'll have to carry word to Lord Borric. From the speed that wagon was coming through the rift, I estimate they can bring in several hundred men a day, perhaps a great deal more. Tell the Duke it would be suicide to try to take the machine. Their magicians are too powerful. I don't think we can destroy the machine they use to hold the rift open. If I had time to study it . . . He must call for reinforcements from Krondor, perhaps from the East." Pug grabbed Kulgan by the arm. "I can't remember all that. We'll ride double."

Kulgan began to protest but was too weak to prevent the boy's pulling

him to where his horse stood. Ignoring Kulgan's objections, he bullied his master up into the saddle. Pug hesitated a moment, noting the animal's fatigue, then came to a decision. "With both of us to carry, he'll never make it, Kulgan," he shouted as he struck the animal on the flank. "I'll find another."

Pug scanned the area as the horse bearing Kulgan sped away. A riderless mount was wandering about, less than twenty feet away, but as he approached, the animal bolted. Cursing, Pug turned and was confronted by the sight of the black-robed Tsurani regaining his feet. The man appeared confused and weak, and Pug charged him. Only one thought was in Pug's mind: to capture a prisoner, and, from his appearance, a Tsurani magician in the bargain. Pug took the magician by surprise, knocking him down.

The man scrambled backward in alarm as Pug raised his sword threateningly.

The man put forth his hand in what Pug took as a sign of submission, and the boy hesitated. Suddenly a wave of pain passed through him, and he had to fight to keep his feet. He staggered about and through the agony saw a familiar figure riding toward him, shouting his name.

Pug shook his head, and suddenly the pain vanished. Meecham sped toward him, and Pug knew the franklin could carry the Tsurani to the Duke's camp if Pug could keep him from fleeing. So he spun, all pain forgotten, and closed upon the still-supine Tsurani. A look of shock crossed the magician's face when he saw the boy again advancing on him. Pug heard Meecham's voice calling his name from behind but didn't take his eyes from the Tsurani.

Several Tsurani soldiers ran across the meadow, seeking to aid their fallen magician, but Pug stood only a few feet away, and Meecham would reach them in a few more moments.

The magician jumped to his feet and reached into his robe. He pulled out a small device and activated it. A loud humming came from the object. Pug rushed the man, determined to knock the device from his hand, whatever it might be. The device hummed louder, and Pug could hear Meecham again shouting his name as he struck the magician, burying his shoulder in the man's stomach.

Suddenly the world exploded with white and blue lights, and Pug felt himself falling through a rainbow of colors into a pit of darkness.

Pug oPENED his eyes. For a moment he struggled to bring them into focus, for everything in his field of vision seemed to be flickering. He then came fully awake and realized it was still night and the flickering came from campfires a short distance from where he lay. He tried to sit up and found his hands tied behind him. A groan sounded next to him. In the dim light he could make out the features of a LaMutian horse soldier lying a few feet away. He was also bound. His face was drawn, and there was a nasty-looking cut running down from his hairline to his cheekbone, all crusted over with dried blood.

Pug's attention was distracted by the sound of voices speaking low, behind him. He rolled over and saw two Tsurani guards in blue armor standing watch. Several more tied prisoners lay about between the boy and the two aliens, who were speaking together in their strange, musical

-sounding language. One noticed Pug's movement and said something to the other, who nodded and quickly hurried off.

In a moment he was back with another soldier, this one in red-and-yellow armor, with a large crest on his helm, who ordered the two guards to stand Pug up. He was pulled roughly to his feet, and the newcomer stood before him and took stock. This man was dark-haired and had the uptilted, wide-set eyes that Pug had seen before in the field among the Tsurani dead. His cheekbones were flat, and he had a broad brow, topped by thick dark hair. In the dim firelight, his skin looked nearly golden in color.

Except for their short stature, most of the Tsurani soldiers could pass for citizens of many of the nations of Midkemia, but these golden men, as Pug thought of them, resembled some Keshian traders Pug had seen in Crydee years before, from the distant trading city of Shing Lai.

The officer inspected the boy's clothing. Next he knelt and inspected the boots on Pug's feet. He stood and barked an order at the soldier who had fetched him, who saluted and turned to Pug. He seized the bound boy and led him away, on a winding course through the Tsurani camp.

At the center of the camp, large banners hung from the cross pieces of standards, all set in a circle around a large tent. All bore strange designs, creatures of outlandish configuration, depicted in bold colors.

Several had glyphs of an unknown language on them. It was to this place Pug was half pulled, half dragged, through the hundreds of Tsurani soldiers who sat quietly polishing their leather armor and making repairs on weapons. Several watched as he passed, but the camp was free of the usual noise and bustle Pug was used to in the camp of his own army. There was more than just the strange and colorful banners to give this place an otherworld feeling. Pug tried to note the details, so if he could escape and report, he could tell Duke Borric something useful, but he found his senses betrayed by so many unfamiliar images. He didn't know what was important in all he saw.

At the entrance of the large tent, the guard who pulled Pug along was challenged by two others, wearing black-and-orange armor. A quick exchange of words resulted in the tent flap being held aside while Pug was thrust through. He fell forward onto a thick pile of furs and woven mats. From where he lay, Pug could see more banners hanging on the tent walls. The tent was richly fashioned, with silklike hangings and thick rugs and pillows.

Hands roughly pulled him upright, and he could see several men regarding him. All stood dressed in the gaudy armor and crested helms of the Tsurani officers except for two. They sat upon a raised dais covered with cushions. The first wore a simple black robe with cowl pulled back, revealing a thin, pale face and bald pate: a Tsurani magician. The other wore a rich-looking robe of orange with black trim cut below knees and elbows, so that it gave the look of something worn for comfort.

From his wiry, muscled appearance and several visible scars, Pug assumed that this man was a warrior who had put aside his armor for the night.

The man in black said something in a high-pitched, singsong language to the others. None of the other men said anything, but the one in the orange robe nodded. The great tent was lit by a single brazier

near where the two robed men sat. The lean, black-robed one sat forward, and the light from the brazier cast upward on his face, giving him a decidedly demonic look. His words came haltingly, and thick with accent.

"I know only . . . little . . . of your speech. You understand?"

Pug nodded, his heart pounding while his mind worked furiously. Kulgan's training was coming into play. First he calmed himself, clearing the fog that had gripped his mind. Then he extended every sense, automatically, taking in every scrap of information available, seeking any useful bit of knowledge that might improve his chances of survival. The soldier nearest the door seemed to be relaxing, his left arm behind his head as he lay back on a pile of cushions, his attention only half focused on the captive. But Pug noticed that his other hand was never more than an inch from the hilt of a wicked-looking dagger at his belt. A brief gleam of light on lacquer revealed the presence of another dagger hilt, half protruding from a pillow at the right elbow of the man in orange.

The man in black said slowly, "Listen, for I tell you something. Then you asked questions. If you lie, you die. Slowly. Understand?" Pug nodded.

There was no doubt in his mind.

"This man," said the black-robed one, pointing to the man in the short orange robe, "is a . . . great man. He is . . . high man. He is . . ." The man used a word Pug didn't understand. When Pug shook his head, the magician said, "He family great . . . Minwanabi. He second to . . ." He fumbled for a term, then moved his hand in a circle, as if indicating all the men in the tent, officers from their proud plumes. man who lead."

Pug nodded and softly said, "Your lord?"

The magician's eyes narrowed, as if he were about to object to Pug's speaking out of turn, but instead he paused, then said, "Yes. Lord of War. It is that one's will that we are here. This one is second to Lord of War." He pointed to the man in orange, who looked on impassively.

"You are nothing to this man." It was obvious the man was feeling frustration in his inability to convey what he wished. It was plain this lord was something special by the lights of his own people, and the man translating was trying to impress this upon Pug.

The lord cut the translator off and said several things, then nodded toward Pug. The bald magician bobbed his head in agreement, then turned his attention toward Pug. "You are lord?"

Pug looked startled, then stammered out a negative. The magician nodded, translated, and was given instruction by the lord. He turned back to Pug. "You wear cloth like lord, true?"

Pug nodded. His tunic was of a finer fabric than the homespun of the common soldiers. He tried to explain his position as a member in the Duke's court. After several attempts he resigned himself to the presumption they made of his being some sort of highly placed servant.

The magician picked up a small device and held it out to Pug. Hesitating for a moment, the boy reached out and took it. It was a cube of some crystallike material, with veins of pink running throughout. After a moment in his hand, it took on a glow softly pink. The man in orange gave an order, and the magician translated. "This lord says, how many

men along pass to . . ." He faltered and pointed.

Pug had no idea of where he was, or what direction was being pointed to. "I don't know where I am," he said. "I was unconscious when I was brought here."

The magician sat in thought for a moment, then stood. "That way," he said, pointing at a right angle to the direction he had just indicated, "is tall mountain, larger than others. That way," he moved his hand a little, "in sky, is five fires, like so." His hands traced a pattern. After a moment Pug understood. The man had pointed to where Stone Mountain lay and where the constellation called the Five Jewels hung in the sky. He was in the valley they had raided. The pass indicated was the one used as an escape route.

"I . . . really, I don't know how many."

The magician looked closely at the cube in Pug's hand. It continued to glow in soft pink tones. "Good, you tell truth."

Pug then understood that he held some sort of device that would inform his captives if he tried to deceive them. He felt black despair wash over him. He knew that any survival hopes he entertained were going to involve some manner of betraying his homeland.

The magician asked several questions about the nature of the force outside the valley. When most went unanswered, for Pug had not been privy to meetings on strategy matters, the question changed to a more general nature, about common things in Midkemia, but which seemed to hold a fascination for the Tsurani.

The interview continued for several hours. Pug began to feel faint on several occasions as the pressure of the situation combined with his general exhaustion. He was given a strong drink one of these times, which restored his energy for a while but left him light-headed.

He answered every question. Several times he got around the truth device by telling only some of the information requested, not volunteering anything. On several of these occasions, he could tell both the lord and magician were nettled by their inability to deal with answers that were incomplete or complex. Finally the lord indicated the interview was over, and Pug was dragged outside. The magician followed.

Outside the tent the magician stood before Pug. "My lord says, 'I think this servant'" -he pointed at Pug's chest- "he is . . ." He groped for a word. "'He is clever.' My lord does not mind clever servants, for they work well. But he thinks you are too clever. He says to tell you to be careful, for you are now slave. Clever slave may live long time. Too clever slave, dies quickly if . . ." Again the pause. Then a broad smile crossed the magician's face. "If he is fortun . . . fortunate. Yes . . . that is the word." He rolled the word around his mouth one more time, as if savoring the taste of it. "Fortunate."

Pug was led back to the holding area and left with his own thoughts. He looked around and saw that a few other captives were awake. Most looked confused and dispirited. One openly wept. Pug turned his eyes skyward and saw the pink edge along the mountains in the east, heralding the coming dawn.

## CONFLICTS

The RAIN WAS UNCEASING.

Huddled near the mouth of the cave, a group of dwarves sat around a small cook fire, the gloom of the day reflected upon their faces. Dolgan puffed upon his pipe, and the others were working on their armor, repairing cuts and breaks in leather, cleaning and oiling metal. A pot of stew simmered on the fire.

Tomas sat at the back of the cave, his sword set across his knees. He looked blankly past the others, his eyes focused on some point far beyond them.

Seven times the dwarves of the Grey Towers had ventured out against the invaders, and seven times they had inflicted heavy losses. But each time it was clear that the Tsurani's numbers were undiminished. Many dwarves were missing now, their lives bought at a dear price to the enemy, but dearer to the families of the Grey Towers. The long-lived dwarves had fewer children, years further apart, than did humans. Each loss diminished dwarvenkind at a much more damaging cost than could have been imagined by the humans.

Each time the dwarves had gathered and attacked through the mines into the valley, Tomas had been in the van. His golden helm would be a signal beacon for the dwarves. His golden broadsword would arc above the fray, then swing down to take its toll from the enemy. In battle the keep boy was transformed into a figure of power, a fighting hero whose presence on the field struck awe and fear into the Tsurani. Had he possessed any doubt about the magical nature of his arms and armor after driving off the wraith, they were dispelled the first time he wore them into battle.

They had gathered thirty fighting dwarves from Caldara and ventured through the mines to an entrance in the south portion of the captured valley. They surprised a Tsurani patrol not far from the mines and slew them. But during the course of the fighting, Tomas had been cut off from the dwarves by three Tsurani warriors. As they bore down on him, their swords raised high overhead, he felt something take hold of him. Darting between two of them, like some maddened acrobat, he had slain both with a single stroke from one side to the other. The third had been taken quickly from behind before he could recover from the sudden move.

After the fray, Tomas had been filled with an elation new to him, and somehow frightening as well. All the way back from the battle, he had felt suffused with an unknown energy.

Each subsequent battle had gained him the same power and skill of arms. But the elation had become something more urgent, and the last two times the visions had begun. Now for the first time the visions were coming unbidden. They were transparent, like an image laid upon another.

He could see the dwarves through it, as well as the forest beyond. But upon them played a scene of people long dead and places vanished from the memories of the living. Halls decked with golden trappings were lit with torches that threw dancing light from crystal set upon tables. Goblets that never knew human touch were raised to lips that curved in

unfamiliar smiles. Great lords of some long-dead race supped at banquet before his eyes. Strange they were, yet also familiar. Humanlike, but with elven ears and eyes. Tall like the elvenfolk, but broader of shoulder and thicker of arm. The women were beautiful, but in alien ways.

The dream took shape and substance, more vivid than any he had experienced so far. Tomas strained to hear the faint laughter, the sound of alien music, and the spoken words of these people.

He was ripped from his reverie by Dolgan's voice. "Will you take some food, laddie?" He could answer with only a part of his awareness, as he rose and crossed the space between~them to take the offered bowl of meat stew. When his hand touched the bowl, the vision vanished, and he shook his head to clear it.

"Are you all right, Tomas?"

Slowly sitting, Tomas looked at his friend for a moment. "I'm not sure," he said hesitantly. "There is something. I . . . I'm not really sure. Just tired, I guess."

Dolgan looked at the boy. The ravages of battle were showing on his young face. Already he looked less the boy and more the man. But beyond the normal hardening of character expected from battle, something else was occurring in Tomas. Dolgan had not as yet decided if the change was fully for good or ill-or if it could even be considered in those terms. Six months of watching Tomas was not long enough to come to any sort of conclusion.

Since donning the dragon's gift armor, Tomas had become a fighter of legendary capabilities. And the boy . . . no, the young man, was taking on weight, even though food was often scarce. It was as if something were acting to bring him to a growth sufficient to fit the cut of the armor. And his features were gaining a strange cast. His nose had taken on a slightly more angular shape, more finely chiseled than before. His brows had become more arched, his eyes deeper set. He was still Tomas, but Tomas with a slight change in appearance, as if wearing someone else's expression.

Dolgan pulled long on his pipe and looked at the white tabard Tomas wore. Seven times in battle, and free from stain. Dirt, blood, and all other manner of contamination were refused purchase in its fabric. And the device of the golden dragon gleamed as brightly as when they had first found it. So it was also with the shield he wore in battle. Many times struck, still it was free of any scar. The dwarves were circumspect in this matter, for their race had long ago used magic in the fashioning of weapons of power. But this was something else. They would wait and see what it brought before they would judge.

As they finished their meager meal, one of the guards on the edge of camp came into the clearing before the cave. "Someone comes."

The dwarves quickly armed themselves and stood ready. Instead of the strangely armored Tsurani soldiers, a single man dressed in the dark grey cloak and tunic of a Natalese Ranger appeared. He walked directly into the center of the clearing and announced in a voice hoarse from days running through wet forests, "Hail, Dolgan of the Grey Towers." Dolgan stepped forward. "Hail, Grimsworth of Natal."



The rangers were serving as scouts and runners since the invaders had taken the Free City of Walinor. The man walked into the cave mouth and sat down. He was given a bowl of stew, and Dolgan asked, "What news?"

"None good, I'm afraid," he said, between mouthfuls of stew. "The invaders hold a hard front from out of the valley, northeast toward LaMut. Walinor has been reinforced with fresh troops from their homeland and stands like a knife between the Free Cities and the Kingdom. They had thrice raided the main camp of the Kingdom's host when I left two weeks ago, probably again since. They harry patrols from Crydee. I am to tell you that it is believed they will start a drive into your area soon."

Dolgan looked perplexed. "Why do the dukes think that? Our lookouts have seen no increase in the aliens' activity in these parts. Every patrol they send out we attack. If anything, they seem to be leaving us alone."

"I am not sure. I heard that the magician Kulgan thinks the Tsurani seek metals from your mines, though why I do not know. In any event, this is what the dukes have said. They think there will be an assault on the mine entrances in the valley. I am to tell you that new Tsurani troops may be coming into the southern end of the valley, for there has been no new major assault in the north, only the small raids.

"Now you must do what you think is best." So saying, he turned his full attention to the stew.

Dolgan thought. "Tell me, Grimsworth, what news of the elvenfolk?"

"Little. Since the aliens have invaded the southern part of the elven forests, we are cut off. The last elven runner came through over a week before I left. At last word, they had stopped the barbarians at the fords of the river Crydee where it passes through the forest.

"There are also rumors of alien creatures fighting with the invaders. But as far as I know, only a few burned-out village folk have seen these creatures, so I wouldn't place too much stock in what they say.

"There is one interesting piece of news, though. It seems a patrol from Yabon made an unusually broad sweep to the edge of the Lake of the Sky. On the shore they found what was left of some Tsurani and a band of goblins raiding south from the Northlands. At least we don't have to worry about the northern borders. Perhaps we could arrange for them to battle each other for a while and leave us alone."

"Or take up common cause against us," said Dolgan. "Still, I think that unlikely, as the goblins tend to kill first and negotiate later."

Grimsworth chuckled deeply. "It is somehow meet that these two bloody-handed folk should run across one another."

Dolgan nodded. He hoped Grimsworth correct, but was disquieted by the thought of the Nations of the North-as the dwarves thought of the Northlands-joining the fray.

Grimsworth wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I will stay this night only, for if I am to pass safely through their lines, I must move quickly. They step up their patrols to the coast, cutting off Crydee for days at a time. I will spend some time there, then start the long run for the dukes' camp."

"Will you return?" asked Dolgan.

The ranger smiled, his grin showing up brightly against his dark skin. "perhaps, if the gods are obliging. If not I, then one of my brothers. It might be that you'll see Long Leon, for he was sent to Elvandar and, if he is a'right, may be bound here with missives from the Lady Aglaranna. It would be good to know how the elvenfolk fare." Tomas's head came up from his musing at the mention of the Elf Queen's name.

Dolgan puffed on his pipe and nodded. Grimsworth turned to Tomas and spoke directly to him for the first time. "I bring you a message from Lord Borric, Tomas." It had been Grimsworth who carried the first messages from the dwarves along with the news that Tomas was alive and well. Tomas had wanted to return to the Kingdom forces with Grimsworth, but the Natalese Ranger had refused to have him along, citing his need to travel fast and quietly. Grimsworth continued his message. "The Duke rejoices at your good fortune and your good health. But he sends grave news as well. Your friend Pug fell in the first raid into the Tsurani camp and was taken by them. Lord Borric shares your loss."

Tomas stood without a word and moved deep into the cave. He sat in the rear, for a few moments as still as the rock around him, then a faint trembling started in his shoulders. It grew in severity until he shook violently, teeth chattering as if from bitter cold. Then tears came unbidden to his cheeks, and he felt a hot pain rush up from his bowels to his throat, constricting his chest. Without a sound he gasped for breath, and great silent sobs shook him. As the pain grew near-un' bearable, a seed of cold fury formed in the center of his being, pushing upward, displacing the hot pain of grief.

Dolgan, Grimsworth, and the rest looked up when Tomas reentered the light of the fire. "Would you please tell the Duke that I thank him for thinking of me?" he asked the ranger.

Grimsworth nodded. "Yes, I will, lad. I think it would be a'right for you to make the run to Crydee, if you wish to return home. I'm sure Prince Lyam could use your sword."

Tomas thought. It would be good to see home again, but at the keep he would be just another apprentice, even if he did bear arms. They would let him fight if the keep was attacked, but they certainly wouldn't let him participate in raids.

"Thank you, Grimsworth, but I will remain. There is much yet to be done here, and I would be a part of it. I would ask you to give word to my mother and father that I am well enough and think of them."

Sitting down, he added, "If it is my destiny to return to Crydee, I shall."

Grimsworth looked hard at Tomas, seemed about to speak, then noticed a slight shake of Dolgan's head. More than any other humans in the West, the Rangers of Natal were sensitive to the ways of the elves and dwarves. Something was occurring here that Dolgan thought best left unexplored for the time being, and Grimsworth would bow before the dwarven chief's wisdom.

As soon as the meal was finished, guards were posted, and the rest made ready for sleep. As the fire died down, Tomas could hear the faint sounds of inhuman music and again saw the shadows dance. Before sleep claimed him, he plainly saw one figure stand apart from the rest, a tall warrior, fine of face and powerful in countenance, dressed in a

white tabard emblazoned with a golden dragon.

tomas sTOOD with his back pressed against the wall of the passage. He smiled, a cruel and terrible smile. His eyes were wide, whites vivid around pale blue irises. His body was nearly rigid as he stood motionless.

His fingers clenched and unclenched on the hilt of his sword of white and gold.

Images shimmered before his eyes: tall, graceful people who rode on the backs of dragons and lived in halls deep in the earth. Music could be faintly heard in his mind's ear, and strange tongues. The long-dead race called to him, a mighty race who had fashioned this armor, never meant for human use.

More and more the visions came. He could keep his mind free of them most times, but when he felt the battle lust rise, as it did now, the images took on dimension, color, and sound. He would strain to hear the words. They came faintly, and he could almost understand them.

He shook his head, bringing himself back to the present. He looked around the dark passage, no longer surprised at his ability to see in the dark. He signaled across the intersecting tunnel to Dolgan, who stood quietly waiting in position with his men forty feet away and acknowledged him with a wave. On each side of the large tunnel sixty dwarves waited to spring the trap. They waited for the handful of dwarves who were running before a Tsurani force, leading the enemy into the trap.

The sound of footfalls pounding down the tunnel alerted them. In a moment it was joined by the sounds of clashing arms. Tomas tensed.

Several dwarves came into view, moving backward as they fought a rearward action. Passing the side tunnels, the fighting dwarves gave no indication they were aware of their brethren waiting on either side.

As soon as the first Tsurani warriors were past, Tomas cried, "Now!" and leaped forward. Suddenly the tunnel was filled with turning, slashing bodies. The Tsurani were mostly armed with broadswords, ill fitted for close quarters, and the dwarves wielded hand axes and hammers with expertise. Tomas laid about himself, and several bodies fell. The flickering Tsurani torches threw mad, dancing shadows high on the passage walls, creating confusion for the eye.

A shout from the rear of the Tsurani force sounded, and the aliens began to back down the tunnel. Those with shields came to the fore, forming a wall over which the swordsmen could strike. The dwarves were unable to reach far enough to do any damage. Each time a dwarf attacked, the shield wall would stand, and the attacker would be answered by sword blows from behind the shield. In short spurts the enemy backed away.

Tomas moved to the fore, since his reach was long enough to strike at the shield holders. He felled two, but as quickly as each dropped, another took his place. Still the dwarves pressed them and they retreated.

They reached a glory hole, entering it at the lowest level, and the Tsurani rapidly took position in the center of the great cavern, forming a rough circle of shields. The dwarves paused for a moment, then charged the position.

A faint flicker of movement caught Tomas's eye, and he looked up to one of the ledges above. In the darkness of the mine it was impossible

to see anything clearly, but a sudden feeling alerted him. "Look to the rear!" he shouted.

Most of the dwarves had broken through the shield wall and were too busy to heed him, but a few close by stopped their attack and looked up. One standing next to Tomas cried, "From above!"

Black shapes came pouring from above, seeming to crawl down the face of the rock. Other, human, shapes came running down the paths from the higher levels. Lights appeared above as Tsurani warriors on the upper levels opened shuttered lamps and lit torches.

Tomas stopped in shock. Directly behind the few surviving Tsurani in the center of the cavern he could see creatures entering from every opening above, like a herd of ants, which they closely resembled. Unlike ants, though, they were upright from the center of their bodies, with humanlike arms bearing weapons. Their faces, insectlike, had large multifaceted eyes but very humanlike mouths. They moved with incredible speed, dodging forward to strike at the dwarves, who, surprised though they were, responded without hesitation, and the battle was joined. The fray increased in intensity, and several times Tomas faced two opponents, Tsurani, or monster, or both. The creatures were obviously intelligent, for they fought in an organized manner, and their inhuman voices could be heard crying out in the Tsurani tongue.

Tomas looked up after dispatching one of the creatures and saw a new influx of warriors from above. "To me! To me!" he shouted, and the dwarves started fighting toward him. When most were close by, Dolgan could be heard shouting, "Back, fall back! They are too many."

The dwarves slowly began to move toward the tunnel they had entered from, with its relative safety. There they could face a smaller number of creatures and Tsurani and, they hoped, lose them in the mines. Seeing the dwarves moving back, the Tsurani and their allies pressed the attack. Tomas saw a large number of the creatures interpose themselves between the dwarves and the escape route. He sprang forward and heard a strange war cry escape from his lips, words he didn't understand. His golden sword flashed, and with a shriek one of the strange creatures fell. Another wielded a broadsword at him, and he caught it on his shield. A lesser being's arm would have been broken, but the blow rang out on the white shield and the creature backed away, then struck again.

Again he blocked it, and with a looping overhand swing struck through its neck, severing head from body. It stiffened for a moment, then collapsed at his feet. He leaped over its fallen body and landed before three startled Tsurani warriors. One held two lanterns and the others were armed. Before the man with the lanterns could drop them, Tomas jumped forward and struck down the other two men. The third died trying to draw his sword.

Letting his shield hang on his arm, Tomas reached down and grabbed a lantern. He turned and saw the dwarves scrambling over the bodies of the fallen creatures he had killed. Several carried wounded comrades. A handful of dwarves, with Dolgan at their head, held their enemies at bay while the others made good their escape. The dwarves who carried wounded hurried past Tomas.

One, who had stayed behind in the tunnel during the fighting, hastened

forward when his comrades were obviously in retreat. Instead of weapons he carried two bulging skins filled with liquid.

The rear guard was pressed back toward the escape tunnel, and twice soldiers tried to circle to cut them off. Both times Tomas struck out, and they fell. When Dolgan and his fighters stood atop the bodies of the fallen monsters, Tomas yelled, "Be ready to jump."

He took the two heavy skins from the dwarf. "Now!" he shouted.

Dolgan and the others leaped back, and the Tsurani were left standing on the other side of the corpses. Without hesitation, the dwarves sped up the tunnel while Tomas threw the skins at the bodies. They had been carried carefully, for they were fashioned to rupture on impact. Both contained naphtha, which the dwarves had gathered from deep black pools under the mountain. It would burn without a wick, as oil would not.

Tomas raised the lantern and smashed it in the midst of the pools of volatile liquid. The Tsurani, hesitating only briefly were moving forward as the lantern burst. White heat exploded in the tunnel as the naphtha burst into flame. The dwarves, blinded, could hear the screams of the Tsurani who had been caught. When their vision recovered, they could see a single figure striding down the tunnel. Tomas appeared black, outlined against the near-white flames.

When he reached them, Dolgan said, "They'll be upon us when the flames die."

They quickly made their way through a series of tunnels and headed back toward the exit on the western side of the mountains. After they had traveled a short distance, Dolgan halted the party. He and several others stood still, listening to the silence in the tunnels. One dropped to the floor and placed his ear on the ground, but immediately jumped to his feet. "They come! By the sound, hundreds of them, and the creatures too. They must be mounting a major offensive."

Dolgan took stock. Of the hundred and fifty dwarves who had begun the ambush, only seventy or so stood here, and of these, twelve were injured. It could be hoped that others had escaped through other passages, but for the moment they were all in danger.

Dolgan acted quickly. "We must make for the forest." He started to trot along with the others following behind.

Tomas ran easily, but his mind reeled with images. In the heat of battle they assaulted him, more vivid and clear than before. He could see the bodies of his fallen enemies, yet they looked nothing like the Tsurani. He could taste the blood of the fallen, the magic energies that came with him as he drank from their open wounds in the ceremony of victory. He shook his head to clear the images. What ceremony? he wondered.

Dolgan spoke, and Tomas forced his attention to the dwarf's words. "We must find another stronghold," he said as they ran. "Perhaps it would be best to try for Stone Mountain. Our villages here are safe, but we have no base to fight from, for I think the Tsurani will have control of these mines soon. Those creatures of theirs fight well in the dark, and ~ if they have many of them, they can ferret us out of the deeper passages."

Tomas nodded, unable to speak. He was burning inside, a cold fire of

hatred for these Tsurani. They had savaged his homeland and taken his brother in all but name, and now many dwarven friends lay dead under the mountain because of them. His face was grim as he made a silent vow to destroy these invaders, whatever the cost.

THEY MOVED CAUTIOUSLY through the trees, watching for signs of the Tsurani. Three times in six days they had skirmished, and now the dwarves numbered fifty-two. The more seriously wounded had been carried to the relative safety of the high villages, where the Tsurani were unlikely to follow.

Now they approached the southern part of the elven forests. At first they had tried to turn eastward toward the pass, seeking a way toward Stone Mountain. The route was thick with Tsurani camps and patrols, and they had been constantly turned northward. Finally it had been decided to try for Elvandar, where they could find rest from the constant flight.

A scout returned from his position twenty yards ahead and said softly, "A camp, at the ford."

Dolgan considered. The dwarves were not swimmers, and they would need to cross at a ford. It was likely the Tsurani would hold all the fords on this side. They would have to find a place free of guards, if one existed.

Tomas looked around. It was nearly nightfall, and if they were to sneak across the river this close to the Tsurani lines, it would best be done in the dark. Tomas whispered this to Dolgan, who nodded. He signaled the guard to head off to the west of the espied camp, to find a likely looking place to hole up.

After a short wait the guide returned with word of a thicket facing a hollowed rock where they could wait for nightfall. They hurried to the place and found a boulder of granite extruding from the ground, twelve feet tall, and broadening to a base twenty-five or thirty feet across. When they pulled back the brush, they found a hollow in which they could tightly fit. It was only twenty feet across, but it reached back under the rock shelf for over forty feet, angling down. When they were all safely tucked in, Dolgan observed, "This must have been under the river at one time-see how it is worn smooth on the underside. It is cramped, but we should be safe for a bit."

Tomas barely heard, for he was once again fighting his battle against the images, the waking dreams, as he thought of them. He closed his eyes, and again the visions came, and the faint music.

THE VICTORY had been swift, but Ashen-Shugar brooded. Something troubled the Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches. The blood of Algon-Kokoon, of Wind Valley, was still salty upon his lips, and his consorts were now Ashen-Shugar's. Still there was something lacking.

He studied the moredhel dancers, moving in perfect time with the music for his amusement. That was as it should be. No, the lack was felt deep within Ashen-Shugar.

Alengwan, one whom the elves called their Princess, and his latest favorite, sat on the floor beside his throne, awaiting his pleasure. He barely noticed her lovely face and her supple body, clothed in silken

garments that served to accent her beauty rather than conceal it. "Art thou troubled, master?" she asked faintly, her terror of him as thinly veiled as her body.

He glanced away. She had glimpsed his uncertainty, that earned her death, but he would kill her later. Appetites of the flesh had fled lately, both the pleasure of the bed and that of killing. Now he thought upon his nameless feeling, that phantom emotion so strange within. Ashen-Shugar raised his hand, and the dancers were on the floor, foreheads pressed to the stone. The musicians had ceased playing in midnote, it seemed, and the cavern was silent. With a flickering of his hand he dismissed them, and they fled out of the great hall, past the mighty golden dragon, Shuruga, who patiently awaited his master. . .

"ToMAS," CAme the voice.

Tomas's eyes opened with a snap. Dolgan had his hand upon the young man's arm. "It is time. Night has fallen. You've been asleep, laddie."

Tomas shook his head to clear it, and the lingering images fled. He felt a churning in his stomach as the last flickering vision of a warrior in white and gold standing over the bloody body of an elven princess vanished.

With the others, he crawled out from under the overhanging rock, and they set out once more toward the river. The forest was silent, even the night birds seemingly cautious about revealing their whereabouts.

They reached the river without incident, save that they had to lie hidden while a patrol of Tsurani passed. They followed the river, with a scout in front. After a few minutes, the scout returned. "A sandbar crosses the river."

Dolgan nodded, the dwarves moved quietly forward and entered the water in single file. Tomas waited with Dolgan while the others crossed. When the last dwarf entered the water, an inquiring shout sounded from farther up the bank. The dwarves froze. Tomas moved quickly forward and surprised a Tsurani guard who was trying to peer through the gloom. The man cried out as he was killed, and shouting erupted a short way off.

Tomas saw lantern light rapidly approaching him, turned, and ran. He found Dolgan waiting on the bank and shouted, "fly! They are upon US.,

Several dwarves stood indecisively as Tomas and Dolgan splashed into the river. The water was cold, moving rapidly over the sandbar. Tomas had to steady himself as he waded through. The water was only waist deep for him, but the dwarves were covered nearly to their chins. They would never be able to fight in the river.

As the first Tsurani guards leaped into the water, Tomas turned to hold them off while the dwarves made good their escape. Two Tsurani attacked, and he struck them both down. Several more jumped into the river, and he had only a brief moment to see to the dwarves. They were almost at the opposite bank, and he caught sight of Dolgan, helpless frustration clearly marked on his face in the Tsurani lamplight.

Tomas struck out again at the Tsurani soldiers. Four or five were

trying to surround him, and the best he could manage was to keep them at bay. Each time he tried for a kill, he would leave himself open from a different quarter.

The sound of new voices told him it was only a matter of moments before he would be overwhelmed. He vowed to make them pay dearly and lashed out at one man, splitting his shield and breaking his arm.

The man went down with a cry.

Tomas barely caught an answering blow on his shield when a whistling sound sped past his ear, and a Tsurani guard fell screaming, a long arrow protruding from his chest. The air was at once full of arrows. Several more Tsurani fell, and the rest pulled back. Every soldier in the water died before he could reach the shore.

A voice called out, "Quickly, man. They will answer in kind." As if to demonstrate the truth of the warning, an arrow sped past Tomas's face from the other direction. He hurried toward the safety of the opposite bank. A Tsurani arrow struck him in the helm, and he stumbled. As he righted himself, another took him in the leg. He pitched forward and felt the sandy soil of the riverbank below him. Hands reached down and pulled him unceremoniously along.

A dizzy, swimming sensation swept over him, and he heard a voice say, "They poison their arrows. We must . . ." The rest trailed away into blackness.

ToMAs oPENED his eyes. For a moment he had no idea of where he was. He felt light-headed and his mouth was dry. A face loomed over him, and a hand lifted his head as water was placed at his lips. He drank deeply, feeling better afterward. He turned his head a little and saw two men sitting close by. For a moment he feared he had been captured, but then he saw that these men wore dark green leather tunics.

"You have been very ill," said the one who had given him water.

Tomas then realized these men were elves.

"Dolgan?" he croaked.

"The dwarves have been taken to council with our mistress. We could not chance moving you, for fear of the poison. The outworlders have a venom unknown to us, which kills rapidly. We treat it as best we can, but those wounded die as often as not."

He felt his strength returning slowly. "How long?"

"Three days. You have hovered near death since we fished you from the river. We carried you as far as we dared."

Tomas looked around and saw that he had been undressed and was lying under a shelter fashioned from tree branches, a blanket over him. He smelled food cooking over a fire and saw the pot the savory aroma came from. His host noticed and signaled for a bowl to be brought over. Tomas sat up, and his head swam for a moment. He was given a large piece of bread and used it in place of a spoon. The food was delicious, and every bite seemed to fill him with increasing strength. As he ate, he took stock of the others sitting nearby. The two silent elves regarded him with blank expressions. Only the speaker showed any signs of hospitality.

Tomas looked at him and said, "What of the enemy?"



The elf smiled. "The outworlders still fear to cross the river. Here our magic is stronger, and they find themselves lost and confused. No outworlder has reached our shore and returned to the other side." Tomas nodded. When he finished eating, he felt surprisingly well. He tried to stand and found he was only a little shaky. After a few steps, he could feel the strength returning to his limbs, and that his leg was already healed. He spent a few minutes stretching and working out the stiffness of three days sleeping on the ground, then dressed. "You're Prince Calin. I remember you from the Duke's court." Calin smiled in return. "And I you, Tomas of Crydee, though you have changed much in a year's time. These others are Galain and Algavins. If you feel up to it, we can rejoin your friends at the court of the Queen."

Tomas smiled. "Let's go."

They broke camp and set out. At first they moved slowly, giving Tomas plenty of time to gain his wind, but after a while it was evident he was remarkably fit in light of his recent brush with death. Soon the four figures were running through the trees. Tomas, in spite of his armor, kept pace. His hosts glanced questioningly at each other. They ran most of the afternoon before stopping. Tomas looked around the forest and said, "What a wonderful place."

Galain said, "Most of your race would disagree, man. They find the forest frightening, full of strange shapes and fearful sounds."

Tomas laughed. "Most men lack imagination, or possess too much. The forest is quiet and peaceful. It is the most peaceful place I think I have known."

The elves said nothing, but a look of mild surprise crossed Calin's face. "We had best continue, if we are to reach Elvandar before dark."

As night fell, they reached a giant clearing. Tomas stopped and stood rooted by the sight before him. Across the clearing a huge city of trees rose upward. Gigantic trees, dwarfing any oaks imagined, stood together.

They were linked by gracefully arching bridges of branches, flat across the tops, on which elves could be seen crossing from bole to bole. Tomas looked up and saw the trunks rise until they were lost in a sea of leaves and branches. The leaves were deep green, but here and there a tree with golden, silver, or even white foliage could be seen, sparkling with lights. A soft glow permeated the entire area, and Tomas wondered if it ever became truly dark here.

Calin placed his hand on Tomas's shoulder and simply said, "Elvandar."

They hurried

across the clearing, and Tomas could see the elven tree city was even larger than he had first imagined. It spread away on all sides and must have been over a mile across. Tomas felt a thrill of wonder at this magic place, a singular exaltation.

They reached a stairway, carved into the side of a tree, that wound its way upward, into the branches. They started up the steps, and Tomas again felt a sensation of joy, as if the mad frenzy that filled him during a battle had a harmonious aspect of gentler nature.

Upward they climbed, and as they passed the large branches that served as roadways for the elves, Tomas could see elven men and women on all sides. Many of the men wore fighting leather like his guides, but many others wore long, graceful robes or tunics of bright and rich colors. The women were all beautiful, with their hair worn long and down, unlike the ladies of the Duke's court. Many had jewels woven into their tresses that sparkled when they passed. All were tall and graceful.

They reached a gigantic branch and left the stairs. Calin began to warn him about not looking down, for he knew humans had difficulty on the high pathways, but Tomas stood near the edge, looking down with no sign of discomfort or vertigo.

"This is a marvelous place," he said. The three elves exchanged questioning glances, but no words were spoken.

They set off again, and when they came to an intersection of branches, the two elves turned off the path, leaving Tomas and Calin to travel alone. Deeper and deeper they moved, Tomas as surefooted on the branch road as the elf, until they reached a large opening. Here a circle of trees formed a central court for the Elf Queen. A hundred branches met and merged into a huge platform. Aglaranna was sitting upon a wooden throne, surrounded by her court. A single human, in the grey of a Natalese Ranger, stood near the Queen, his black skin gleaming in the night glow. He was the tallest man Tomas had ever seen, and the young man from Crydee knew this must be Long Leon, the ranger Grimsworth had spoken of.

Calin led Tomas into the center of the clearing and presented him to queen Aglaranna. She showed slight surprise as she saw the figure of the young man in white and gold, but quickly composed her features. In her rich voice she welcomed Tomas to Elvandar, and bade him stay as long as he wished.

The court adjourned, and Dolgan came to where Tomas stood. "Well, laddie, I am glad to see you recovered. It was an undecided issue when we left you. I hated to do so, but I think you understand. I was in need of getting word on the fighting near Stone Mountain."

Tomas nodded. "I understand. What news?"

Dolgan shook his head. "Bad, I fear. We are cut off from our brethren. I think we will be staying with the elvenfolk for a while, and I have little love for these heights."

Tomas broke into open laughter at that. Dolgan smiled, for it was the first time since the boy had donned the dragon's armor he had heard the sound.

16

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WagoNs gROANED UNDER heavy LOADS.

Whips cracked and wheels creaked as lumbering oxen pulled their burdens down the road toward the beach. Arutha, Fannon, and Lyam rode before soldiers protecting the wagons traveling between the castle

and the shore. Behind the wagons a ragged crowd of townspeople followed.

Many carried bundles or pulled carts, following the Duke's sons toward the waiting ships.

They turned down the road that split off from the town road, and Arutha's gaze swept over the signs of destruction. The once-thriving town of Crydee was now covered in an acrid blue haze. The sounds of hammering and sawing rang through the morning air as workmen labored to repair what they could of the damage.

The Tsurani had raided at sundown two days before, racing through the town, overwhelming the few guards at their posts before an alarm was raised by terrified women, old men, and children. The aliens had run riot through the town, not pausing until they reached dockside, where they had fired three ships, heavily damaging two. The damaged ships were already limping toward Carse, while the undamaged ships in the harbor had moved down the coast to their present location, north of Sailor's Grief.

The Tsurani had put most of the buildings near the quay to the torch, but while heavily damaged, they were reparable. The fire had spread into the heart of town, resulting in the heaviest loss there. The Hall of the Craftmasters, the two inns, and dozens of lesser buildings were now only smoldering ruins. Blackened timbers, cracked roof tiles, and scorched stones marked their locations. Fully one third of Crydee had burned before the fire had been brought under control.

Arutha had stood on the wall, watching the hellish glow reflected on the clouds above the town as the flames spread. Then at first light he had led the garrison out, finding the Tsurani already vanished into the forests.

Arutha still chafed at the memory. Fannon had advised Lyam not to allow the garrison out until dawn-fearing it was a ruse to get the castle gates open or to lure the garrison into the woods where a larger force waited in ambush-and Lyam had acceded to the old Swordmaster's request. Arutha was sure he could have prevented much of the damage had he been allowed to rout the Tsurani at once.

As he rode down the coast road, Arutha was lost in thought. Orders arrived the day before instructing Lyam to leave Crydee. The Duke's aide-de-camp had been killed, and with the war beginning its third year this spring, he wished Lyam to join him at his camp in Yabon. For reasons Arutha didn't understand, Duke Borric had not given command to him as expected; instead Borric had named the Swordmaster garrison commander. But, thought the younger Prince, at least Fannon will be less ready to order me about without Lyam's backing. He shook his head slightly in an attempt to dislodge his irritation. He loved his brother, but wished Lyam had shown more willingness to assert himself. Since the beginning of the war, Lyam had commanded in Crydee, but it had been Fannon making all the decisions. Now Fannon had the office as well as the influence.

"Thoughtful, brother?"

Lyam had pulled his own horse up and was now beside Arutha, who shook his head and smiled faintly. "Just envious of you."

Lyam smiled his warmest at his younger brother. "I know you wish to be going, but Father's orders were clear. You're needed here."

"How needed can I be where every suggestion I make has been ignored?"

Lyam's expression was conciliatory. "You're still disturbed by Father's decision to name Fannon commander of the garrison."

Arutha looked hard at his brother. "I am now the age you were when Father named you commander at Crydee. Father was full commander and second Knight-General in the West at my age, only four years shy of being named King's Warden of the West. Grandfather trusted him enough to give him full command."

"Father's not Grandfather, Arutha. Remember, Grandfather grew up in a time when we were still warring in Crydee, pacifying newly conquered lands. He grew up in war. Father did not. He learned all his warcraft down in the Vale of Dreams, against Kesh, not defending his own home as Grandfather had. Times change."

"How they change, brother," Arutha said dryly. "Grandfather, like his father before him, would not have sat behind safe walls. In the two years since the war began, we have not mounted one major offensive against the Tsurani. We cannot continue letting them dictate the course of the war, or surely they will prevail."

Lyam regarded his brother with concern mirrored in his eyes.

"Arutha, I know you are restless to harry the enemy but Fannon is right in saying we dare not risk the garrison. We must hold here and protect what we have."

Arutha cast a quick glance at the ragged townspeople behind. "I'll tell those who follow how well they're protected."

Lyam saw the bitterness in Arutha. "I know you blame me, brother. Had I taken your advice, rather than Fannon's . . ."

Arutha lost his harsh manner. "It is not your doing," he conceded.

"Old Fannon is simply cautious. He also is of the opinion a soldier's worth is measured by the grey in his beard. I am still only the Duke's boy. I fear my opinions from now on will receive short shrift."

"Curb thy impatience, youngster," he said in mock seriousness. "Perhaps between your boldness and Fannon's caution, a safe middle course will be followed." Lyam laughed.

Arutha had always found his brother's laughter infectious and couldn't repress a grin. "Perhaps, Lyam," he said with a laugh.

They came to the beach where longboats waited to haul the refugees out to the ships anchored offshore. The captains would not return to the quayside until they were assured their ships would not again come under attack, so the fleeing townspeople were forced to walk through the surf to board the boats. Men and women began to wade to the boats, bundles of belongings and small children held safely overhead. Older children swam playfully, turning the event into sport. There were many tearful partings, for most of the townsmen were remaining to rebuild their burned homes and serve as levies in the dukes' army. The women, children, and old men who were leaving would be carried down the coast to Tulan, the southernmost town in the Duchy, as yet untroubled by either the Tsurani or the rampaging Dark Brothers in the Green Heart.

Lyam and Arutha dismounted, and a soldier took their horses. The brothers watched as soldiers carefully loaded crates of messenger pigeons

onto the sole longboat pulled up on shore. The birds would be shipped through the Straits of Darkness to the dukes' camp. Pigeons trained to fly to the camp were now on their way to Crydee, and with their arrival some of the responsibility for carrying information to and from the dukes' camp would be lifted from Martin Longbow's trackers and the Natalese Rangers. This was the first year mature pigeons raised in the camp~necessary for them to develop the homing instinct~were available.

Soon the baggage and refugees were loaded, and it was time for Lyam to depart. Fannon bid him a stiff and formal farewell, but it was apparent from his controlled manner that the old Swordmaster felt concern for the Duke's older son. With no family of his own, Fannon had been something of an uncle to the boys when they were growing, personally instructing them in swordsmanship, the maintenance of armor, and the theories of warcraft. He maintained his formal pose, but both brothers could see the genuine affection there.

When Fannon left, the brothers embraced. Lyam said, "Take care of Fannon." Arutha looked surprised. Lyam grinned and said, "I'd not care to think what would happen here should Father pass you over once more and name Algon commander of the garrison."

Arutha groaned, then laughed with his brother. As Horsemaster, Algon was technically second-in-command behind Fannon. All in the castle shared genuine affection for the man, and deep respect for his vast knowledge of horses, but everyone conceded his general lack of knowledge about anything besides horses. After two years of warfare, he still resisted the idea the invaders came from another world, an attitude that caused Tully no end of irritation.

Lyam moved into the water, where two sailors held the longboat for him. Over his shoulder he shouted, "And take care of our sister, Arutha."

Arutha said he would. Lyam leaped into the longboat, next to the precious pigeons, and the boat was pushed away from shore. Arutha watched as the boat dwindled into the distance.

Arutha walked slowly back to where a soldier held his mount. He paused to stare down the beach. To the south, the high bluffs reared, dominated by Sailor's Grief, which stood upthrust against the morning sky. Arutha silently cursed the day the Tsurani ship crashed against those rocks.

CARLINE sTOOD ATOP the southern tower of the keep, watching the horizon, gathering her cloak around her against the sea breeze. She had stayed at the castle, bidding Lyam good-bye earlier, not wishing to ride to the beach. She preferred that her fears not becloud Lyam's happiness at joining their father in the dukes' camp. Many times over the last two years she had chided herself over such feelings. Her men were soldiers, all trained since boyhood for war. But since word had reached Crydee of Pug's capture, she had remained afraid for them.

A feminine clearing of the throat made Carline turn. Lady Glynis, the Princess's companion for the last four years, smiled slightly and indicated with a nod of her head the newcomer who appeared at the trapdoor leading down into the tower.

Roland emerged from the doorway in the floor. The last two years had added to his growth, and now he stood as tall as Arutha. He was still thin but his boyish features were resolving into those of a man. He bowed and said, "Highness."

Carline acknowledged the greeting with a nod and gestured that Lady Glynis should leave them alone. Glynis fled down the stairway into the tower.

Softly Carline said, "You did not ride to the beach with Lyam?"

"No, Highness."

"You spoke with him before he left?"

Roland turned his gaze to the far horizon. "Yes, Highness, though I must confess to a foul humor at his going."

Carline nodded understanding. "Because you have to stay."

He spoke with bitterness, "Yes, Highness."

Carline said gently, "Why so formal, Roland?"

Roland looked at the Princess, seventeen years old just this last Midsummer's Day. No longer a petulant little girl given to outbursts of temper, she was changing into a beautiful young woman of thoughtful introspection. Few in the castle were unaware of the many nights' sobbing that issued from Carline's suite after news of Pug had reached the castle. After nearly a week of solitude, Carline had emerged a changed person more subdued, less wilful. There was little outward to show how Carline felt, but Roland knew she carried a scar.

After a moment of silence, Roland said, "Highness, Then . . ." He halted, then said, "It is of no consequence."

Carline placed her hand upon his arm. "Roland, whatever else, we have always been friends."

"It pleases me to think that is true."

"Then tell me, why has a wall grown between us?"

Roland sighed, and there was none of his usual roguish humor in his answer. "If there has, Carline, it is not of my fashioning."

A spark of the girl's former self sprang into being, and with a temperamental edge to her voice she said, "Am I, then, the architect of this estrangement?"

Anger erupted in Roland's voice. "Aye, Carline!" He ran his hand through his wavy brown hair and said, "Do you remember the day I fought with Pug? The very day before he left."

At the mention of Pug's name she tensed. Stiffly she said, "Yes, I remember."

"Well, it was a silly thing, a boys' thing, that fight. I told him should he ever cause you any hurt, I'd thrash him. Did he tell you that?"

Moisture came unbidden to her eyes. Softly she said, "No, he never mentioned it."

Roland looked at the beautiful face he had loved for years and said, "At least then I knew my rival." He lowered his voice, the anger slipping away. "I like to think then, near the end, he and I were fast friends. Still, I vowed I'd never stop my attempts to change your heart."

Shivering, Carline drew her cloak about her, though the day was not that cold. She felt conflicting emotions within, confusing emotions.

Trembling, she said, "Why did you stop, Roland?"

Sudden harsh anger burst within Roland. For the first time he lost his

mask of wit and manners before the Princess. "Because I can't contend with a memory, Carline." Her eyes opened wide, and tears welled up and ran down her cheeks. "Another man of flesh I can face, but this shade from the past I cannot grapple with." Hot anger exploded into words. "He's dead, Carline. I wish it were not so, he was my friend and I miss him, but I've let him go. Pug is dead. Until you grant that this is true, you are living with a false hope."

She put her hand to her mouth, palm outward, her eyes regarding him in wordless denial. Abruptly she turned and fled down the stairs. Alone, Roland leaned his elbows on the cold stones of the tower wall. Holding his head in his hands, he said, "Oh, what a fool I have become!"

"PATROL!" shoutED the guard from the wall of the castle. Arutha and Roland turned from where they watched soldiers giving instructions to levies from the outlying villages.

They reached the gate, and the patrol came riding slowly in, a dozen dirty, weary riders, with Martin Longbow and two other trackers walking beside. Arutha greeted the Huntmaster and then said, "What have you there?"

He indicated the three men in short grey robes who stood between the line of horsemen. "Prisoners Highness," answered the hunter, leaning on his bow.

Arutha dismissed the tired riders as other guards came to take position around the prisoners. Arutha walked to where they waited, and when he came within touching distance, all three fell to their knees, putting their foreheads to the dirt.

Arutha raised his eyebrows in surprise at the display. "I have never seen such as these."

Longbow nodded in agreement. "They wear no armor, and they didn't give fight or run when we found them in the woods. They did as you see now, only then they babbled like fishwives."

Arutha said to Roland, "Fetch Father Tully. He may be able to make something of their tongue." Roland hurried off to find the priest. Longbow dismissed his two trackers, who headed for the kitchen. A guard was dispatched to find Swordmaster Fannon and inform him of the captives.

A few minutes later Roland returned with Father Tully. The old priest of Astalon was dressed in a deep blue, nearly black, robe, and upon catching a glimpse of him, the three prisoners set up a babble of whispers.

When Tully glanced in their direction, they fell completely silent.

Arutha looked at Longbow in surprise.

Tully said, "What have we here?"

"Prisoners," said Arutha. "As you are the only man here to have had some dealings with their language, I thought you might get something out of them."

"I remember little from my mind contact with the Tsurani Xomich, but I can try." The priest spoke a few halting words, which resulted in a confusion as all three prisoners spoke at once. The centermost snapped at his companions, who fell silent. He was short, as were the others, but powerfully built. His hair was brown, and his skin swarthy, but his eyes

were a startling green. He spoke slowly to Tully, his manner somehow less deferential than his companions'.

Tully shook his head. "I can't be certain, but I think he wishes to know if I am a Great One of this world."

"Great One?" asked Arutha.

"The dying soldier was in awe of the man aboard ship he called 'Great One.' I think it was a title rather than a specific individual. Perhaps Kulgan was correct in his suspicion these people hold their magicians or priests in awe."

"Who are these men?" asked the Prince.

Tully spoke to them again in halting words. The man in the center spoke slowly, but after a moment Tully cut him off with a wave of his hand. To Arutha he said, "These are slaves."

"Slaves?" Until now there had been no contact with any Tsurani except warriors. It was something of a revelation to find they practiced slavery. While not unknown in the Kingdom, slavery was not widespread and was limited to convicted felons. Along the Far Coast, it was nearly nonexistent. Arutha found the idea strange and repugnant. Men might be born to low station, but even the lowliest serf had rights the nobility were obligated to respect and protect. Slaves were property. With a sudden disgust, Arutha said, "Tell them to get up, for mercy's sake."

Tully spoke and the men slowly rose, the two on the flanks looking about like frightened children. The other stood calmly, eyes only slightly downcast. Again Tully questioned the man, finding his understanding of their language returning.

The centermost man spoke at length, and when he was done Tully said, "They were assigned to work in the enclaves near the river. They say their camp was overrun by the forest people—he refers to the elves, I think—and the short ones."

"Dwarves, no doubt," added Longbow with a grin.

Tully threw him a withering look. The rangy forester simply continued to smile. Martin was one of the few young men of the castle never intimidated by the old cleric, even before becoming one of the Duke's staff.

"As I was saying," continued the priest, "the elves and dwarves overran their camp. They fled, fearing they would be killed. They wandered in the woods for days until the patrol picked them up this morning."

Arutha said, "This fellow in the center seems a bit different from the others. Ask why this is so."

Tully spoke slowly to the man, who answered with little inflection in his tones. When he was done, Tully spoke with some surprise. "He says his name is Tchakachakalla. He was once a Tsurani officer!"

Arutha said, "This may prove most fortunate. If he'll cooperate, we may finally learn some things about the enemy."

Swordmaster Fannon appeared from the keep and hurried to where Arutha was questioning the prisoners. The commander of the Crydee garrison said, "What have you here?"

Arutha explained as much as he knew about the prisoners, and when he was finished, Fannon said, "Good, continue with the questioning."

Arutha said to Tully, "Ask him how he came to be a slave."



Without sign of embarrassment, Tchakachakalla told his story. When he was done, Tully stood shaking his head. "He was a Strike Leader. It may take some time to puzzle out what his rank was equivalent to in our armies, but I gather he was at least a Knight-Lieutenant. He says his men broke in one of the early battles and his 'house' lost much honor. He wasn't given permission to take his own life by someone he calls the Warchief. Instead he was made a slave to expiate the shame of his command."

Roland whistled low. "His men fled and he was held responsible."

Longbow said, "There's been more than one earl who's bollixed a command and found himself ordered by his Duke to serve with one of the Border Barons along the Northern Marches."

Tully shot Martin and Roland a black look. "If you are finished?" He addressed Arutha and Fannon: "From what he said, it is clear he was stripped of everything. He may prove of use to us."

Fannon said, "This may be some trick. I don't like his looks."

The man's head came up, and he fixed Fannon with a narrow gaze. Martin's mouth fell open. "By Kilian! I think he understands what you said."

Fannon stood directly before Tchakachakalla. "Do you understand me?"

"Little, master." His accent was thick, and he spoke with a slow singsong tone alien to the King's Tongue. "Many Kingdom slaves on Kelewan. Know little King's Tongue."

Fannon said, "Why didn't you speak before?"

Again without any show of emotion, he answered, "Not ordered.

Slave obey. Not . . ." He turned to Tully and spoke a few words.

Tully said, "He says it isn't a slave's place to show initiative."

Arutha said, "Tully, do you think he can be trusted?"

"I don't know. His story is strange, but they are a strange people by our standards. My mind contact with the dying soldier showed me much I still don't understand." Tully spoke to the man.

To Arutha the Tsurani said, "Tchakachakalla tell." Fighting for words, he said, "I Wedewayo. My house, family. My clan Hunzan. Old, much honor. Now slave. No house, no clan, no Tsuranuanni. No honor. Slave obey."

Arutha said, "I think I understand. If you go back to the Tsurani, what would happen to you?"

Tchakachakalla said, "Be slave, maybe. Be killed, maybe. All same."

"And if you stay here?"

"Be slave, be killed?" He shrugged, showing little concern.

Arutha said, slowly, "We keep no slaves. What would you do if we set you free?"

A flicker of some emotion passed over the slave's face, and he turned to Tully and spoke rapidly. Tully translated. "He says such a thing is not possible on his world. He asks if you can do such a thing."

Arutha nodded. Tchakachakalla pointed to his companions. They work. They always slaves."

"And you?" said Arutha.

Tchakachakalla looked hard at the Prince and spoke to Tully, never taking his eyes from Arutha. Tully said, "He's recounting his lineage. He

says he is Tchakachakalla, Strike Leader of the Wedewayo, of the Hunzan Clan. His father was a Force Leader, and his great-grandfather Warchief of the Hunzan Clan. He has fought honorably, and only once has he failed in his duty. Now he is only a slave, with no family, no clan, no nation, and no honor. He asks if you mean to give him back his honor."

Arutha said, "If the Tsurani come, what will you do?"

Tchakachakalla indicated his companions. "These men slaves.

Tsurani come, they do nothing. Wait. Go with . . ." He and Tully exchanged brief remarks and Tully supplied him with the word he wished. ". . . victors. They go with victors." He looked at Arutha, and his eyes came alive. "You make Tchakachakalla free. Tchakachakalla be your man, lord. Your honor is Tchakachakalla's honor. Give life if you say. Fight Tsurani if you say."

Fannon spoke. "Likely story that. More's the odds he's a spy."

The barrel-chested Tsurani looked hard at Fannon, then with a sudden motion stepped before the Swordmaster, and before anyone could react, pulled Fannon's knife from his belt.

Longbow had his own knife out an instant later, as Arutha's sword was clearing its scabbard. Roland and the other soldiers were only a moment behind. The Tsurani made no threatening gesture, but simply flipped the knife, reversing it and handing it to Fannon hilt first.

"Master think Tchakachakalla enemy? Master kill. Give warrior's death, return honor."

Arutha returned his sword to his scabbard and took the knife from Tchakachakalla's hand. Returning the knife to Fannon, he said, "No, we will not kill you." To Tully he said, "I think this man may prove useful. For now, my inclination is to believe him."

Fannon looked less than pleased. "He may be a very clever spy, but you're right. There's no harm if we keep a close watch on him. Father Tully, why don't you take these men to soldiers' commons and see what you can learn from them. I'll be along shortly."

Tully spoke to the three slaves and indicated they should follow. The two timid slaves moved at once, but Tchakachakalla bent his knee before Arutha. He spoke rapidly in the Tsurani tongue; Tully translated.

"He's just demanded you either kill him or make him your man. He asked how a man can be free with no house, clan, or honor. On his world such men are called grey warriors and have no honor."

Arutha said, "Our ways are not your ways. Here a man can be free with no family or clan and still have honor."

Tchakachakalla bent his head slightly while listening, then nodded. He rose and said, "Chakachakalla understand." Then with a grin he added, "Soon, I be your man. Good lord need good warrior.

Tchakachakalla good warrior."

"Tully, take them along, and find out how much Tchak . . .

Tchakal . . ." Arutha laughed. "I can't pronounce that mouthful." To the slave he said, "If you're to serve here, you need a Kingdom name." The slave looked about and then gave a curt nod.

Longbow said, "Call him Charles. It's as close a name as I can imagine."

Arutha said, "As good a name as any. From now on, you will be called

Charles."

The newly named slave said, "Tcharles?" He shrugged and nodded. Without another word he fell in beside Father Tully, who led the slaves toward the soldiers' commons.

Roland said, "What do you make of that?" as the three slaves vanished around the corner.

Fannon said, "Time will tell if we've been duped."

Longbow laughed. "I'll keep an eye on Charles, Swordmaster. He's a tough little fellow. He traveled at a good pace when we brought them in. Maybe I'll turn him into a tracker."

Arutha interrupted. "It will be some time before I'll be comfortable letting him outside the castle walls."

Fannon let the matter drop. To Longbow he said, "Where did you find them?"

"To the north, along the Clearbrook branch of the river. We were following the signs of a large party of warriors heading for the coast."

Fannon considered this. "Gardan leads another patrol near there. Perhaps he'll catch sight of them and we'll find out what the bastards are up to this year." Without another word he walked back toward the keep.

Martin laughed, Arutha was surprised to hear him. "What in this strikes you as funny, Huntmaster?"

Martin shook his head. "A little thing, Highness. It's the Swordmaster himself. He'll not speak of it to anyone, but I wager he would give all he owns to have your father back in command. He's a good soldier, but he dislikes the responsibility."

Arutha regarded the retreating back of the Swordmaster, then said, "I -think you are right, Martin." His voice carried a thoughtful note.

"I've been at odds with Fannon so much of late, I lost sight of the fact that he never requested this commission."

Lowering his voice, Martin said, "A suggestion, Arutha."

Arutha nodded. Martin pointed to Fannon. "Should anything happen to Fannon, name another Swordmaster quickly do not wait for your father's consent. For if you wait, Algon will assume command, and he is a fool."

Arutha stiffened at the Huntmaster's presumption, while Roland tried to silence Martin with a warning look. Arutha coldly said, "I thought you a friend of the Horsemaster."

Martin smiled, his eyes hinting at strange humor. "Aye, I am, as are all in the castle. But anyone you ask will tell you the same: take his horses away, and Algon is an indifferent thinker."

Nettled by Martin's manner, Arutha said, "And who should take his place? The Huntmaster?"

Martin laughed, a sound of such open, clear amusement at the " thought Arutha found himself less angry at his suggestion.

"I?" said the Huntmaster. "Heaven forfend, Highness. I am a simple hunter, no more. No, should the need come, name Gardan. He is by far the most able soldier in Crydee."

Arutha knew Martin was correct, but gave in to impatience. "Enough. Fannon is well, and I trust will remain so."

Martin nodded. "May the gods preserve him . . . and us all. Please

excuse me, it was but a passing concern. Now, with Your Highness's leave, I've not had a hot meal in a week."

Arutha indicated he could leave, and Martin walked away toward the kitchen. Roland said, "He is wrong on one account, Arutha."

Arutha stood with his arms folded across his chest, watching Longbow as he vanished around the corner. "What is that, Roland?"

"That man is much more than the simple hunter he pretends."

Arutha was silent for a moment. "He is. Something about Martin Longbow has always made me uneasy, though I have never found fault with him."

Roland laughed, and Arutha said, "Now something strikes you as funny, Roland?"

Roland shrugged. "Only that many think you and he are much alike."

Arutha turned a black gaze upon Roland, who shook his head. "It's often said we take offense most in what we see of ourselves in others. It's true, Arutha. You both have that same cutting edge to your humor, almost mocking, and neither of you suffers foolishness." Roland's voice became serious. "There's no mystery to it, I should think. You're a great deal like your father, and with Martin having no family, it follows he would pattern himself after the Duke."

Arutha became thoughtful. "Perhaps you're right. But something else troubles me about that man." He left the thought unfinished and turned toward the keep.

Roland fell into step beside the thoughtful Prince and wondered if he had overstepped himself.

The NIGHT THUNDERED. Ragged bolts of lightning shattered the darkness as clouds rolled in from the west. Roland stood on the southern tower watching the display. Since dinner his mood had been as dark as the western sky. The day had not gone well. First he had felt troubled by his conversation with Arutha by the gate. Then Carline had treated him at dinner with the same stony silence he had endured since their meeting on this very tower two weeks earlier. Carline had seemed more subdued than usual, but Roland felt a stab of anger at himself each time he chanced a glance in her direction. Roland could still see the pain in the Princess's eyes. "What a witless fool I am," he said aloud.

"Not a fool, Roland."

Carline was standing a few paces away, looking toward the coming storm. She clutched a shawl around her shoulders, though the air was temperate. The thunder had masked her footfalls, and Roland said, "It is a poor night to be upon the tower, my lady."

She came to stand beside him and said, "Will it rain? These hot nights bring thunder and lightning, but usually little rain."

"It will rain. Where are your ladies?"

She indicated the tower door. "Upon the stairs. They fear the lightning, and besides, I wished to speak with you alone."

Roland said nothing, and Carline remained silent for a time. The night was sundered with violent displays of energy tearing across the heavens, followed by cracking booms of thunder. "When I was young," she said at last, "Father used to say on nights such as this the gods were sporting in the sky."

Roland looked at her face, illuminated by the single lantern hanging on the wall. "My father told me they made war."

She smiled. "Roland, you spoke rightly on the day Lyam left. I have been lost in my own grief, unable to see the truth. Pug would have been the first to tell me that nothing is forever. That living in the past is foolish and robs us of the future." She lowered her head a little. "Perhaps it has something to do with Father. When Mother died, he never fully recovered. I was very young, but I can still remember how he was. He used to laugh a great deal before she died. He was more like Lyam then. After . . . well, he became more like Arutha. He'd laugh, but there'd be a hard edge to it, a bitterness."

"As if somehow mocking?"

She nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, mocking. Why did you say that?"

"Something I noticed . . . something I pointed out to your brother today. About Martin Longbow."

She sighed. "Yes, I understand. Longbow is also like that."

Softly Roland said, "Nevertheless, you did not come to speak of your brother or Martin."

"No, I came to tell you how sorry I am for the way I've acted. I've been angry with you for two weeks, but I'd no right. You only said what was true. I've treated you badly."

Roland was surprised. "You've not treated me badly, Carline. I acted the boor."

"No, you have done nothing but be a friend to me, Roland. You told me the truth, not what I wanted to hear. It must have been hard . . . considering how you feel." She looked out at the approaching storm. "When I first heard of Pug's capture, I thought the world ended."

Trying to be understanding, Roland quoted, "'The first love is the difficult love.'"

Carline smiled at the aphorism. "That is what they say. And with you?"

Roland mustered a carefree stance. "So it seems, Princess."

She placed her hand upon his arm. "Neither of us is free to feel other than as we do, Roland."

His smile became sadder. "That is the truth, Carline."

"Will you always be my good friend?"

There was a genuine note of concern in her voice that touched the young Squire. She was trying to put matters right between them, but without the guile she'd used when younger. Her honest attempt turned aside any frustration he felt at her not returning his affections fully. "I will, Carline. I'll always be your good friend."

She came into his arms and he held her close, her head against his chest. Softly she said, "Father Tully says that some loves come unbidden like winds from the sea, and others grow from the seeds of friendship."

"I will hope for such a harvest, Carline. But should it not come, still I will remain your good friend."

They stood quietly together for a time, comforting each other for different causes, but sharing a tenderness each had been denied for two years. Each of them was lost in the comfort of the other's nearness, and

neither saw what the lightning flashes revealed for brief instants. On the horizon, beating for the harbor, came a ship.

THE WINDS WHIPPED the banners on the palisades of the castle walls as rain began to fall. As water gathered in small pools, the lanterns cast yellow reflections upward off the puddles to give an otherworldly look to the two men standing on the wall.

A flash of lightning illuminated the sea, and a soldier said, "There! Highness, did you see? Three points south of the Guardian Rocks." He extended his arm, pointing the way.

Arutha peered into the gloom, his brow furrowed in concentration. "I can see nothing in this darkness. It's blacker than a Guts-wan priest's soul out there." The soldier absently made a protective sign at the mention of the killer god. "Any signal from the beacon tower?"

"None, Highness. Not by beacon, nor by messenger."

Another flash of lightning illuminated the night, and Arutha saw the ship outlined in the distance. He swore. "It will need the beacon at Longpoint to reach the harbor safely." Without another word, he ran down the stairs leading to the courtyard. Near the gate he instructed a soldier to get his horse and two riders to accompany him. As he stood there waiting, the rain passed, leaving the night with a clean but warm, moist feeling. A few minutes later, Fannon appeared from the direction of the soldiers' commons. "What's this? Riding?"

Arutha said, "A ship makes for the harbor, and there is no beacon at Longpoint."

As a groom brought Arutha's horse, followed by two mounted soldiers, Fannon said, "You'd best be off, then. And tell those stonecrowned layabouts at the lighthouse I'll have words for them when they finish duty."

Arutha had expected an argument from Fannon and felt relieved there would be none. He mounted and the gates were opened. They rode through and headed down the road toward town.

The brief rain had made the night rich with fresh odors: the flowers along the road, and the scent of salt from the sea, soon masked by the ' acrid odor of burned wood from the charred remnants of gutted buildings as they neared town.

They sped past the quiet town, taking the road along the harbor. A pair of guards stationed by the quayside hastily saluted when they saw the Prince fly past. The shuttered buildings near the docks bore mute testimony to those who had fled after the raid.

They left the town and rode out to the lighthouse, following a bend in the road. Beyond the town they gained their first glimpse of the lighthouse, upon a natural island of rock joined to the mainland by a long causeway of stone, topped by a compacted dirt road. The horses' hooves beat a dull tattoo upon the dirt as they approached the tall tower. A lightning flash lit up the sky, and the three riders could see the ship running under full sail toward the harbor.

Shouting to the others, Arutha said, "They'll pile upon the rocks without a beacon."

One of the guards shouted back, "Look, Highness. Someone signals!" They reined in and saw figures near the base of the tower. A man

dressed in black stood swinging a shuttered lantern back and forth. It could be clearly seen by those on the ship, but not by anyone upon the castle walls. In the dim light, Arutha saw the still forms of Crydee soldiers lying on the ground. Four men, also attired in black with head coverings that masked their faces, ran toward the horsemen. Three drew long swords from back scabbards, while the fourth aimed a bow. The soldier to Arutha's right cried out as an arrow struck him in the chest. Arutha charged his horse among the three who closed, knocking over two while his sword slashed out, taking the third across the face. The man fell without a sound.

The Prince wheeled around and saw his other companion also engaged, hacking downward at the bowman. More men in black dashed from within the tower, rushing forward silently.

Arutha's horse screamed. He could see an arrow protruding from its neck. As it collapsed beneath him, he freed his feet from the stirrups and lifted his left leg over the dying animal's neck, jumping free as it struck the ground. He hit and rolled, coming to his feet before a short figure in black with a long sword held high overhead with both hands. The long blade flashed down, and Arutha jumped to his left, thrusting with his own sword. He took the man in the chest, then yanked his sword free. Like the others before, the man in black fell without uttering a cry.

Another flash of lightning showed men rushing toward Arutha from the tower. Arutha turned to order the remaining rider back to warn the castle, but the shouted command died aborning when he saw the man pulled from his saddle by swarming figures in black. Arutha dodged a blow from the first man to reach him and ran past three startled figures. He smashed at the face of a fourth man with his sword hilt, trying to knock the man aside. His only thought was to open a pathway so he might flee to warn the castle. The struck man reeled back, and Arutha attempted to jump past him. The falling man reached out with one hand, catching Arutha's leg as he sprang.

Arutha struck hard stone and felt hands frantically grab at his right foot. He kicked backward with his left and took the man in the throat with his boot. The sound of the man's windpipe being crushed was followed by a convulsion of movement.

Arutha came to his feet as another attacker reached him, others only a step behind. Arutha sprang backward trying to gain some distance. His boot heel caught on a rock, and suddenly the world tilted crazily. He found himself suspended in space for an instant, then his shoulders met rock as he bounced down the side of the causeway. He hit several more rocks and icy water closed over him.

The shock of the water kept him from passing into unconsciousness. Dazed, he reflexively held his breath, but had little wind. Without thinking, he pushed upward and broke the surface with a loud, ragged gasp. Still groggy, he nevertheless possessed enough wits to duck below the surface when arrows struck the water near him. He couldn't see a thing in the murky darkness of the harbor but clung to the rocks, pulling himself along more than swimming. He moved back toward the tower end of the causeway, hoping the raiders would think him headed in the other direction.

He quietly surfaced and blinked the salt water from his eyes. Peering around the shelter of a large rock, he saw black figures searching the darkness of the water. Arutha moved quietly, nestling himself into the rocks. Bruised muscles and joints made him wince as he moved, but nothing seemed broken.

Another flash of lightning lit the harbor. Arutha could see the ship speeding safely into Crydee harbor. It was a trader, but rigged for speed and outfitted for war. Whoever piloted the ship was a mad genius, for he cleared the rocks by a scant margin, heading straight for the quayside around the bend of the causeway. Arutha could see men in the rigging, frantically reefing in sails. Upon the deck a company of black-clad warriors stood with weapons ready.

Arutha turned his attention to the men on the causeway and saw one motion silently to the others. They ran off in the direction of the town. Ignoring the pain in his body, Arutha pulled himself up, negotiating the slippery rocks to regain the dirt road of the causeway. Staggering a bit, he came to his feet and looked off toward the town. There was still no sign of trouble, but he knew it would erupt shortly.

Arutha half staggered, half ran to the lighthouse tower and forced himself to climb the stairs. Twice he came close to blacking out, but he reached the top of the tower. He saw the lookout lying dead near the signal fire. The oil-soaked wood was protected from the elements by a hood that hung suspended over it. The cold wind blew through the open windows on all sides of the building.

Arutha found the dead sentry's pouch and removed flint, steel, and tinder. He opened the small door in the side of the metal hood, using his body to shield the wood from the wind. The second spark he fired caught in the wood, and a small flame sprang into existence. It quickly spread, and when it was burning fully, Arutha pulled on the chain hoist that elevated the hood. With an audible whoosh, the flames sprang fully to the ceiling as the wind struck the fire.

Against one wall stood a jar of powder mixed by Kulgan against such an emergency. Arutha fought down dizziness as he bent again to pull the knife from the dead sentry's belt. He used it to pry the lid off the jar and then tossed the entire contents into the fire.

Instantly the flames turned bright crimson, a warning beacon none could confuse with a normal light. Arutha turned toward the castle, standing away from the window so as not to block the light. Brighter and brighter the flames burned as Arutha found his mind going vague again. For a long moment there was silence in the night, then suddenly an alarm sounded from the castle. Arutha felt relief. The red beacon was the signal for reavers in the harbor, and the castle garrison had been well drilled to meet such raids. Fannon might be cautious with chasing Tsurani raiders into the woods at night, but a pirate ship in his harbor was something he would not hesitate to answer.

Arutha staggered down the stairs, stopping to support himself at the door. His entire body hurt, and he was nearly overcome by dizziness. He drew a deep breath and headed for the town. When he came to where his dead horse lay, he looked about for his sword, then remembered he had carried it with him into the harbor. He stumbled to where one of his riders lay, next to a black-clad Bowman. Arutha bent down to pick



up the fallen soldier's sword nearly blacking out as he stood. He held himself erect for a moment, fearing he might lose consciousness if he moved, and waited as the ringing in his head subsided. He slowly reached up and touched his head. One particularly sore spot, with an angry lump forming, told him he had struck his head hard at least once as he fell down the causeway. His fingers came away sticky with clotting ~ blood.

Arutha began to walk to town, and as he moved, the ringing in his head resumed. For a time he staggered, then he tried to force himself to run but after only three wobbly strides he resumed his clumsy walk. He hurried as much as he could rounding the bend in the road to come in sight of town. He heard faint sounds of fighting. In the distance he could see the red light of fires springing heavenward as buildings were put to the torch. Screams of men and women sounded strangely remote and muted to Arutha's ears.

He forced himself into a trot, and as he closed upon the town, anticipation of fighting forced away much of the fog clouding his mind. He turned along the harborside, with the dockside buildings burning, it was bright as day but no one was in sight. Against the quayside the raiders' ship rested, a gangway leading down to the dock. Arutha approached quietly, fearing guards had been left to protect it. When he reached the gangway, all was quiet. The sounds of fighting were distant, as if all the raiders had attacked deeply into the town.

As he began to move away, a voice cried out from the ship, "Gods of mercy! Is anyone there?" The voice was deep and powerful, but with a controlled note of terror.

Arutha hurried up the gangway, sword ready. He stopped when he reached the top. From the forward hatch cover he could see fire glowing brightly belowdecks. He looked about: everywhere his eyes traveled he saw seamen lying dead in their own blood. From the rear of the ship the voice cried out, "You, man. If you're a godsfearing man of the Kingdom, come help me."

Arutha made his way amid the carnage and found a man sitting against the starboard rail. He was large, broad-shouldered, and barrelchested.

He could have been any age between twenty and forty. He held the side of an ample stomach with his right hand blood seeping through his fingers. Curly dark hair swept back from a receding hairline, and he wore his black beard cut short. He managed a weak smile as he pointed to a black-clothed figure lying nearby. "The bastards killed my crew and fired my ship. That one made the mistake of not killing me with the first blow." He pointed at the section of a fallen yard pinning his legs. "I can't manage to budge that damned yard and hold my guts in at the same time. If you'd lift it a bit, I think I can pull myself free."

Arutha saw the problem: the man was pinned down at the short end of the yard, tangled in a mass of ropes and blocks. He gripped the long end and heaved upward, moving it only a few inches, but enough. With a half grunt, half groan, the wounded man pulled his legs out. "I don't think my legs are broken, lad. Give me a hand up and we'll see."

Arutha gave him a hand and nearly lost his footing pulling the bulky seaman to his feet. "Here, now," said the wounded man. "You're not in much of a fighting trim yourself, are you?"

"I'll be all right" said Arutha steadying the man while fighting off an attack of nausea.

The seaman leaned upon Arutha. "We'd better hurry, then. The fire is spreading." With Arutha's help, he negotiated the gangway. When they reached the quayside, gasping for breath, the heat was becoming intense. The wounded seaman gasped "Keep going!"

Arutha nodded and slung the man's arm over his shoulder. They set off down the quay, staggering like a pair of drunken sailors on the town. Suddenly there came a roar, and both men were slammed to the ground. Arutha shook his dazed head and turned over. Behind him a great tower of flames leaped skyward. The ship was a faintly seen black silhouette in the heart of the blinding yellow-and-white column of fire. Waves of heat washed over them, as if they were standing at the door of a giant oven.

Arutha managed to croak "What was that?"

His companion gave out with an equally feeble reply: "Two hundred barrels of Quegan fire oil."

Arutha spoke in disbelief. "You didn't say anything about fire oil back aboard ship."

"I didn't want you getting excited. You looked half-gone already. I figured we'd either get clear or we wouldn't."

Arutha tried to rise, but fell back. Suddenly he felt very comfortable resting on the cool stone of the quay. He saw the fire begin to dim before his eyes, then all went dark.

Arutha OPENED his eyes and saw blurred shapes over him. He blinked and the images cleared. Carline hovered over his sleeping pallet, looking anxiously on as Father Tully examined him. Behind Carline, Fannon watched, and next to him stood an unfamiliar man. Then Arutha remembered him. "The man from the ship."

The man grinned. "Amos Trask, lately master of the Sidonie until those bast-begging the Princess's pardon-those cursed land rats put her to the torch. Standing here thanks to Your Highness."

Tully interrupted. "How do you feel?"

Arutha sat up, finding his body a mass of dull aches. Carline placed cushions behind her brother. "Battered, but I'll survive." His head swam a little. "I'm a bit dizzy." ,

Tully looked down his nose at Arutha's head. "Small wonder. You took a nasty crack. You may find yourself occasionally dizzy for a few days, but I don't think it is serious."

Arutha looked at the Swordmaster. "How long?"

Fannon said, 'A patrol brought you in last night. It's morning."

"The raid?"

Fannon shook his head sadly. 'The town's gutted. We managed to kill them all, but there's not a whole building left standing in Crydee. The fishing village at the south end of the harbor is untouched, but otherwise everything was lost."

Carline fussed around near Arutha, tucking in covers and fluffing his cushions. 'you should rest."

He said, "Right now, I'm hungry."

She brought over a bowl of hot broth. He submitted to the light

broth in place of solid food, but refused to let her spoon-feed him.

Between mouthfuls he said, "Tell me what happened."

Fannon looked disturbed. "It was the Tsurani."

Arutha's hand stopped, his spoon poised halfway between bowl and mouth.

"Tsurani? I thought they were reavers, from the Sunset Islands."

"At first so did we, but after talking to Captain Trask here, and the Tsurani slaves who are with us, we've pieced together a picture of what's happened."

Tully picked up the narrative. "From the slaves' story, these men were specially chosen. They called it a death raid. They were selected to enter the town, destroy as much as possible, then die without fleeing. They burned the ship as much as a symbol of their commitment as to deny it to us. I gather from what they say it's considered something of a great honor."

Arutha looked at Amos Trask. "How is it they managed to seize your ship, Captain?"

"Ah, that is a bitter story, Highness. He leaned to his right a little, and Arutha remembered his wound.

"How is your side?"

Trask grinned, his dark eyes merry. "A messy wound but not a serious one. The good father put it right as new, Highness."

Tully made a derisive sound. "That man should be in bed. He is more seriously injured than you. He would not leave until he saw you were all right."

Trask ignored the comment. "I've had worse. We once had a fight with a Quegan war galley turned rogue pirate and-well, that's another story. You asked about my ship." He limped over closer to Arutha's pallet. "We were outward bound from Hlanque with a load of weapons and fire oil. Considering the situation here, I thought to find a ready market. We braved the straits early in the season, stealing the march on other ships, or so we hoped.

"But while we made the passage early, we paid the price. A monstrous storm blew up from the south, and we were driven for a week. When it was over, we headed east, striking for the coast. I thought we'd have no trouble plotting our position from landmarks. When we sighted land, not one aboard recognized a single feature. As none of us had ever been north of Crydee, we judged rightly we had gone farther than we had thought.

"We coasted by day, heaving to at night for I'd not risk unknown shoals and reefs. On the third night the Tsurani came swimming out from shore like a pod of dolphins. Dived right under the ship, and came up on both sides. By the time I was awake from the commotion on deck, there was a full half dozen of the bast-begging the Princess's pardon-them Tsurani swarming over me. It took them only minutes to take my ship." His shoulders sagged a bit. "It's a hard thing to lose one's ship, Highness."

He grimaced and Tully stood, making Trask sit on the stool next to Arutha. Trask continued his story. "We couldn't understand what they said, their tongue is more suited for monkeys than men-I myself speak five civilized languages and can do 'talk-see' in a dozen more. But as I was saying, we couldn't understand their gibberish, but they made their

intentions clear enough.

"They pored over my charts." He grimaced in remembering. "I purchased them legal and aboveboard from a retired captain down in Durbin. Fifty years of experience in those charts, there were, from here in Crydee to the farthest eastern shores of the Keshian Confederacy, and they were tossing them around my cabin like so much old canvas until they found the ones they wanted. They had some sailors among them for as soon as they recognized the charts, they made their plans known to me.

"Curse me for a freshwater fisherman, but we had heaved to only a few miles north of the headlands above your lighthouse. If we'd sailed a little longer, we would have been safely in Crydee harbor two days ago." Arutha and the others said nothing. Trask continued, "They went through my cargo holds and started tossing things overboard, no matter what. Over five hundred fine Quegan broadswords, over the side. Pikes, lances, longbows, everything-I guess to keep any of it from reaching Crydee somehow. They didn't know what to do with the Quegan fire oil the barrels would've needed a dock hoist to get them out of the hold ~ so they left it alone. But they made sure there wasn't a weapon -aboard that wasn't in their hands. Then some of the little land rats got dressed up in those black rags, swam ashore, and started down the coast toward the lighthouse. While they were going, the rest were praying, on their knees rocking back and forth, except for a few with bows watching my crew. Then all of a sudden, about three hours after sundown, they're up and kicking my men around, pointing to the harbor on the map.

"We set sail and headed down the coast. The rest you know. I guess they judged you would not expect an attack from seaward."

Fannon said, "They judged correctly. Since their last raid we've patrolled the forests heavily. They couldn't get within a day's march of Crydee without our knowing. This way they caught us unawares." The old Swordmaster sounded tired and bitter. "Now the town is destroyed, and we've a courtyard filled with terrified townsmen."

Trask also sounded bitter. "They put most of their men ashore quickly, but left two dozen to slaughter my men." An expression of pain crossed his face. "They were a hard lot, my lads, but on the whole good enough men. We didn't know what was happening until the first of my boys began to fall from the spars with Tsurani arrows in them, waving like little flags as they hit the water. We thought they were going to have us take them out again. My boys put up a struggle then, you can bet. But they didn't start soon enough. Marlinspikes and belayin' pins can't stand up to men with swords and bows."

Trask sighed deeply, the pain on his face as much from his story as from his injury. "Thirty-five men. Dock rats, cutthroats, and murderers all, but they were my crew. I was the only one allowed to go killing them. I cracked the skull of the first Tsurani who came at me, took his sword, and killed another. But the third one knocked it from my hand and ran me through." He barked a short, harsh-sounding laugh. "I broke his neck. I passed out for a time. They must have thought me dead. The next I knew, the fires were going and I started yelling. Then I saw you come up the gangway."

Arutha said, "You're a bold man, Amos Trask."

A look of deep pain crossed the large man's face. "Not bold enough to

keep my ship, Highness. Now I'm nothing more than another beached sailor."

Tully said, "Enough for now. Arutha, you need rest." He put his hand on Amos Trask's shoulder. "Captain, you'd do well to follow his example. Your wound is more serious than you admit. I'll take you to a room where you can rest."

The captain rose, and Arutha said, "Captain Trask."

"Yes, Highness?"

"We have need of good men here in Crydee."

A glimmer of humor crossed the seaman's face. "I thank you, Highness.

Without a ship, though, I don't know what use I could be."

Arutha said, "Between Fannon and myself, we'll find enough to keep you busy."

The man bowed slightly, restricted by his wounded side. He left with Tully. Carline kissed Arutha on the cheek, saying, "Rest now." She took away the broth and was escorted from the room by Fannon. Arutha was asleep before the door closed.

17

Attack

Carline lunged She thrust the point of her sword in a low line, aiming a

killing blow for the stomach. Roland barely avoided the thrust by a strong beat of his blade, knocking hers out of line. He sprang back and for a moment was off balance. , Carline saw the hesitation and lunged forward again. Roland laughed as he suddenly leaped away, knocking her blade aside once more, then stepping outside her guard. Quickly tossing his sword from right hand to left he reached out and caught her sword arm at the wrist ' pulling her, in turn, off balance. He swung her about stePPing behind her. He wrapped his left arm around her waist, being careful of his sword edge, and pulled her tightly to him. She struggled against his superior strength but while he was behind her, she could inflict no more than angry curses on him. "it was a trick! A loathsome trick,' she spat. She kicked helplessly as he laughed. 'Don't overextend

yourself that way, even when it looks like a clean kill. You've good speed, but you press too much. Learn patience. Wait for a clear opening, then attack. You overbalance that much and you're dead.' He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and pushed her unceremoniously away. Carline stumbled forward, regained her balance, and turned. "Rogue! Make free with the royal person, will you?' She advanced on him, sword at the ready, slowly

circling to the left. With her father away, Carline had pestered Arutha into allowing Roland to teach her swordplay. Her final argument had been, "What do I do if the Tsurani enter the castle? Attack them with embroidery needles?" Arutha had relented more from tiring of the constant nagging than from any conviction she would have to use the weapon.

Suddenly Carline launched a furious attack in high line, forcing Roland to retreat across the small court behind the keep. He found himself backed against a low wall and waited. She lunged again, and he nimbly stepped aside, the padded point of her rapier striking the wall an instant after he vacated the spot. He jumped past her, playfully swatting her across the rump with the flat of his blade as he took up position behind her. "And don't lose your temper, or you'll lose your head as well." "Oh!" she cried, spinning to face him. Her expression was caught halfway between anger and amusement. "You monster!"

Roland stood ready, a look of mock contrition on his face. She measured the distance between them and began to advance slowly. She was wearing tight-fitting men's trousers-to the despair of Lady Marna-and a man's tunic cinched at the waist by her sword belt. In the last year her figure had filled out, and the snug costume bordered on the scandalous. Now eighteen years of age, there was nothing about Carline that was girlish. The specially crafted boots she wore, black, ankle-high, carefully beat upon the ground as she stepped the distance between them, and her long, lustrous dark hair was tied into a single braid that swung freely about her shoulders.

Roland welcomed these sessions with her. They had rediscovered much of their former playful fun in them, and Roland held the guarded hope her feelings for him might be developing into something more than friendship. In the year since Lyam's departure they had practiced together, or had gone riding when it was considered safe, near the castle.

The time with her had nourished a sense of companionship between them he had previously been unable to bring about. While more serious than before, she had regained her spark and sense of humor. Roland stood lost in reflection a moment. The little-girl Princess, spoiled and indulged, was gone. The child grown petulant and demanding from the boredom of her role was now a thing of the past. In her stead was a young woman of strong mind and will, tempered by harsh lessons.

Roland blinked and found himself with her sword's point at his throat. He playfully threw down his own weapon and said, "Lady, I yeild!"

She laughed. "What were you daydreaming about, Roland?"

He gently pushed aside the tip of her sword. "I was remembering how distraught Lady Marna became when you first went riding in those clothes and came back all dirty and very unladylike."

Carline smiled at the memory. "I thought she would stay abed for a week." She put up her sword. "I wish I could find reasons to wear these clothes more often. They are so comfortable."

Roland nodded, grinning widely. "And very fetching." He made a display of leering at the way they hugged Carline's curvaceous body. "Though I expect that is due to the wearer."

She tilted her nose upward in a show of disapproval. "You are a rogue and a flatterer, sir. And a lecher."

With a chuckle, he picked up his sword. "I think that is enough for today, Carline. I could endure only one defeat this afternoon. Another, and I shall have to quit the castle in shame."

Her eyes widened as she drew her weapon, and he saw the dig had struck home. "Oh! Shamed by a mere girl, is it?" she said, advancing with her sword ready.

Laughing, he brought his own to the ready, backing away. "Now, Lady. This is most unseemly."

Leveling her sword, she fixed him with an angry gaze. "I have Lady Marna to be concerned with my manners, Roland. I don't need a buffoon like you to instruct me."

"Buffoon!" he cried, leaping forward. She caught his blade and riposted, nearly striking. He took the thrust on his blade, sliding his own along hers until they stood corps a corps. He seized her sword wrist with his free hand and smiled. "You never want to find yourself in this position."

She struggled to free herself, but he held her fast. "Unless the Tsurani start sending their women after us, most anyone you fight will prove stronger than yourself, and from here have his way with you." So saying, he jerked her closer and kissed her.

She pulled back, an expression of surprise on her face. Suddenly the sword fell from her fingers and she grabbed him. Pulling him with surprising force, she kissed him with a passion that answered his.

When he pulled back, she regarded him with a look of surprise mixed with longing. A smile spread on her face, as her eyes sparkled. Quietly she said, "Roland, I-"

Alarm sounded throughout the castle, and the shout of "Attack!" could be heard from the walls on the other side of the keep.

Roland swore softly and stepped back. "Of all the gods-cursed, illtimed luck." He headed into the hall that led to the main courtyard.

With a grin he turned and said, "Remember what you were going to say, Lady." His humor vanished when he saw her following after, sword in hand. "Where are you going?" he asked, all lightness absent from his voice.

Defiantly she said, "To the walls. I'm not going to sit in the cellars any longer."

Firmly he said, "No. You've never experienced true fighting. As a sport, you do well enough with a sword, but I'll not risk your freezing the first time you smell blood. You'll go to the cellars with the other ladies and lock yourself safely in."

Roland had never spoken to her in this manner before, and she was amazed. Always before he had been the teasing rogue, or the gentle friend. Now he was suddenly a different man. She began to protest, but he cut her off. Taking her by the arm, half leading, half dragging her, he walked in the direction of the cellar doors. "Roland!" she cried. "Let me go! "

Quietly he said, "You'll go where you were ordered. And I'll go where I'm ordered. There will be no argument."

She pulled against his hold, but the grip was unyielding. "Roland! Take your hand from me this instant!" she commanded.

He continued to ignore her protests and dragged her along the hall. At the cellar door a startled guard watched the approaching pair. Roland came to a stop and propelled Carline toward the door with a less than gentle shove. Her eyes wide in outrage, Carline turned to the guard. "Arrest him! At once! He"-anger elevated her voice to a most unladylike volume-"laid hands on me!"

The guard hesitated, looking from one to another, then tentatively began to step toward the Squire. Roland raised a warning finger and pointed it at the guard, less than an inch from his nose. "You will see Her Highness to her appointed place of safety. You will ignore her objections, and should she try to leave, you will restrain her. Do you understand?"

His voice left no doubt he was deadly serious.

The guard nodded, but still was reluctant to place hands upon the Princess. Without taking his eyes from the soldier's face, Roland pushed Carline gently toward the door and said, "If I find she has left the cellar before the signal that all is safe has sounded, I will ensure that the Prince and the Swordmaster are' informed you allowed the Princess to step in harm's way."

That was enough for the guard. He might not understand who had right of rank between Princess and Squire during attacks, but there was no doubt at all in his mind of what the Swordmaster would do to him under such circumstances. He turned to the cellar door before Carline could return and said, "Highness, this way," forcing her down the steps. Carline backed down the stairs, fuming. Roland closed the door behind them. She turned after another backward step, then haughtily walked down. When they reached the room set aside for the women of the castle and town in time of attack, Carline found the other women waiting, huddled together, terrified.

The guard hazarded an apologetic salute and said, "Begging the Princess's pardon, but the Squire seemed most determined."

Suddenly Carline's scowl vanished, and in its place a small smile appeared. She said, "Yes, he did, didn't he?"

RiDErs sPED into the courtyard, the massive gates swinging shut behind.

Arutha watched from the walls and turned to Fannon.

Fannon said, "Of all the worst possible luck."

Arutha said, "Luck has nothing to do with it. The Tsurani would certainly not be attacking when the advantage is ours." Everything looked peaceful, except the burned town standing as a constant reminder of the war. But he also knew that beyond the town, in the forests to the north and northeast, an army was gathering. And by all reports as many as two thousand more Tsurani were on the march toward Crydee.

"Get back inside, you rat-bitten, motherless dog."

Arutha looked downward into the courtyard and saw Amos Trask kicking at the panic-stricken figure of a fisherman, who dashed back into one of the many rude huts erected inside the wall of the castle to house the last of the displaced townsfolk who had not gone south. Most of the townspeople had shipped for Carse after the death raid, but a few had stayed the winter. Except for some fishermen who were to stay to



help feed the garrison, the rest were due to be shipped south to Carse and Tulan this spring. But the first ships of the coming season were not due in for weeks. Amos had been put in charge of these folk since his ship had been burned the year before, keeping them from getting underfoot and from causing too much disruption in the castle. The former sea captain had proved a gift during the first weeks after the burning of the town. Amos had the necessary talent for command and kept the tough, ill-mannered, and individualistic fisherfolk in line. Arutha judged him a braggart, a liar, and most probably, a pirate, but generally likable. Gardan came up the stairs from the court, Roland following. Gardan saluted the Prince and Swordmaster, and said, "That's the last patrol, sir."

"Then we must only wait for Longbow," said Fannon.

Gardan shook his head. "Not one patrol caught sight of him, sir."

"That's because Longbow is undoubtedly closer to the Tsurani than any soldier of sound judgment is likely to get," ventured Arutha. "How soon, do you think, before the rest of the Tsurani arrive?"

Pointing to the northeast, Gardan said, "Less than an hour, if they push straight through." He looked skyward. "They have less than four hours of light. We might expect one attack before nightfall. Most likely they'll take position, rest their men, and attack at first light."

Arutha glanced at Roland. "Are the women safe?"

Roland grinned. "All, though your sister might have a few harsh words about me when this is over."

Arutha returned the grin. "When this is over, I'll deal with it." He looked around. "Now we wait."

Swordmaster Fannon's eyes swept the deceptively peaceful scene before them. There was a note of worry mixed with determination in his voice as he said "Yes, now we wait."

Martin RAISED His hand. His three trackers stopped moving. The woods were quiet as far as they could tell, but the three knew Martin possessed more acute senses than they. After a moment he moved along, scouting ahead.

For ten hours, since before dawn, they had been marking the Tsurani line of march. As well as he could judge, the Tsurani had been repulsed once more from elvandar at the fords along the river Crydee and were now turning their attention to the castle at Crydee. For three years the Tsurani had been occupied along four fronts: against the Duke's armies in the east, the elves and dwarves along the north, the hold at Crydee in the west, and the Brotherhood of the Dark path and the goblins in the south.

The trackers had stayed close to the Tsurani trailbreakers, occasionally too close. Twice they had been forced to run from attackers, Tsurani warriors tenaciously willing to follow the Huntmaster of Crydee and his men. Once they had been overtaken, and Martin had lost one of his men in the fighting.

Martin gave the raucous caw of a crow, and in a few minutes his three remaining trackers joined him. One, a long-faced young man named Garret, said "They move far west of where I thought they would turn."

Longbow considered. "Aye, it seems they may be planning to encircle all of the lands around the castle. Or they may simply wish to strike from an unexpected quarter." Then with a wry grin he said, "But most likely, they simply sweep the area before the attack begins, ensuring they have no harrying forces at their backs."

Another tracker said, "Surely they know we mark their passing."

Longbow's crooked grin widened. "No doubt. I judge them unconcerned with our comings and goings." He shook his head.

"These Tsurani are an arrogant crew." Pointing, he said, "Garret will come with me. You two will make straight for the castle. Inform the Swordmaster some two thousand more Tsurani march on Crydee."

Without a word the two men set off at a brisk pace toward the castle.

To his remaining companion he spoke lightly. "Come, let us return to the advancing enemy and see what he is about now."

Garret shook his head. "Your cheerful manner does little to ease my worrisome mind, Huntmaster."

Turning back the way they had come, Longbow said, "One time is much like another to death. She comes when she will. So why give over your mind to worry?"

"Aye," said Garret, his long face showing he was unconvinced. "Why, indeed? It's not death arriving when she will that worries me; it's your inviting her to visit that gets me shivering."

Martin laughed softly. He motioned for Garret to follow. They set off at a trot, covering ground with long, loose strides. The forest was bright with sunlight, but between the thick boles were many dark places wherein a watchful enemy could lurk. Garret left it to Longbow's able judgment whether these hiding places were safe to pass. Then, as one, both men stopped in their tracks at the sound of movement ahead.

Noiselessly they melted into a shadowy thicket. A minute passed slowly with neither man speaking. Then a faint whispering came to them, the words unclear.

Into their field of vision came two figures, moving cautiously along a north-south path that intersected the one Martin followed. Both were dressed in dark grey cloaks, with bows held ready. They stopped, and one kneeled down to study the signs left by Longbow and his trackers. He pointed down the trail and spoke to his companion, who nodded and returned the way they had come.

Longbow heard Garret hiss as he drew in his breath. Peering around the area was a tracker of the Brotherhood of the Dark Path. After a moment of searching he followed his companion.

Garret began to stir and Martin gripped his arm. "Not yet," Longbow whispered.

Garret whispered back, "What are they doing this far north"

Martin shook his head. "They've slipped in behind our patrols along the foothills. We've grown lax in the south, Garret. We never thought they'd move north this far west of the mountains." He waited silently for a moment, then whispered, "Perhaps they tire of the Green Heart and are trying for the Northlands to join their brothers."

Garret started to speak, but stopped when another Dark Brother entered the spot vacated by the others a moment before. He looked

around, then raised his hand in signal. Other figures appeared along the trail intersecting the one Martin's men had traveled. In ones, twos, and threes, Dark Brothers crossed the path, disappearing into the trees. Garret sat holding his breath. He could hear Martin counting faintly as the figures crossed their field of vision: ". . . ten, twelve, fifteen, sixteen, eighteen . . ."

The stream of dark-cloaked figures continued, seemingly unending to Garret. ". . . thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-four . . ."

As the crossing continued, larger numbers of Brothers appeared, and after a time Martin whispered, "There are more than a hundred." Still they came, some now carrying bundles on their backs and shoulders.

Many wore the dark grey mountain cloaks, but others were dressed in green, brown or black clothing. Garret leaned close to Martin and whispered, "You are right. It is a migration north. I mark over two hundred "

Martin nodded. "And still they come."

For many more minutes the Dark Brothers crossed the trail, until the flood of warriors was replaced by ragged-looking females and young. When they had passed, a company of twenty fighters crossed the trail, and then the area was quiet.

They waited a moment in silence. Garret said "They are elven-kin to move so large a number through the forest undetected so long."

Martin smiled. "I'd advise you not mention that fact to the next elf you encounter." He stood slowly, unbending cramped muscles from the long sitting in the brush. A faint sound echoed from the east, and Martin got a thoughtful look on his face. "How far along the trail do you judge the Dark Brothers' march?"

Garret said, "At their rear, a hundred yards, at the van, perhaps a quarter mile or less. Why?"

Martin grinned, and Garret became discomforted by the mocking humor in his eyes. "Come, I think I know where we can have some fun."

Garret groaned softly, "Ah, Huntmaster, my skin gets a poxy feeling when you mention fun."

Martin struck the man a friendly blow to the chest with the back of his hand. "Come, stout fellow." The Huntmaster broke trail, with Garret behind. They loped along through the woods, easily avoiding obstacles that would have hindered less experienced woodsmen.

They came to a break in the trail, and both men halted. just down the trail, at the edge of their vision in the gloom of the forest, came a company of Tsurani trailbreakers. Martin and Garret faded into the trees, and the Huntmaster said, "The main column is close behind. When they reach the crossing where the Dark Brothers passed, they might chance to follow."

Garret shook his head. "Or they might not, so we will make certain they do." Taking a deep breath, he added, "Oh well," then made a short silent prayer to Kilian, the Singer of Green Silences, Goddess of Foresters, as they unshouldered their bows.

Martin stepped out onto the trail and took aim and Garret followed his example. The Tsurani trailbreakers came into view, cutting away the

thick underbrush along the trail so the main body could more easily follow. Martin waited until the Tsurani were uncomfortably close, then he let fly, just as the first trailbreaker took notice of them. The first two men fell, and before they hit the ground, two more arrows were loosed. Martin and Garret pulled arrows from back quivers in fluid motions, set arrow to bowstring, and let fly with uncommon quickness and accuracy. It was not from any act of kindness Martin had selected Garret five years before. In the eye of the storm, he would stand calmly, do as ordered, and do it with skill.

Ten stunned Tsurani fell before they could raise an alarm. Calmly Martin and Garret shouldered their bows and waited. Then along the trail appeared a veritable wall of colored armor. The Tsurani officers in the van stopped in shocked silence as they regarded the dead trailbreakers.

Then they saw the two foresters standing quietly down the trail and shouted something. The entire front of the column sprang forward, weapons drawn.

Martin leaped into the thicket on the north side of the trail, Garret a step behind. They dashed through the trees, the Tsurani in close pursuit.

Martin's voice filled the forest with a wild hunter's call. Garret shouted as much from some nameless, crazy exhilaration as from fear. The noise behind was tremendous as a horde of Tsurani pursued them through the trees.

Martin led them northward, paralleling the course taken by the Dark Brotherhood. After a time he stopped and between gasping breaths said, "Slowly, we don't want to lose them."

Garret looked back and saw the Tsurani were out of sight. They leaned against a tree and waited. A moment later the first Tsurani came into view, hurrying along on a course that angled off to the northwest. With a disgusted look, Martin said, "We must have killed the only skilled trackers on their whole bloody world." He took his hunter's horn from his belt and let forth with such a loud blast the Tsurani soldier froze, an expression of shock clearly evident on his face even from where Martin and Garret stood.

The Tsurani looked around and caught sight of the two huntsmen. Martin waved for the man to follow, and he and Garret were off again. The Tsurani shouted for those behind and gave chase. For a quarter mile they led the Tsurani through the woods, then they angled westward.

Garret shouted, between heaving breaths, "The Dark Brothers they'll know . . . we come."

Martin shouted back, "Unless they've . . . suddenly all . . . gone deaf." He managed a smile. "The Tsurani . . . hold a six-to-one . . . advantage. I . . . think it . . . only fair to let . . . the Brotherhood have the . . . ambush."

Garret spared enough breath for a low groan and continued to follow his master's lead. They crashed out of a thicket and Martin stopped, grabbing Garret by the tunic. He cocked his head and said, "They're up ahead."

Garret said, "I don't know . . . how you can hear a thing with . . . all that cursed racket behind." It sounded as if most of the Tsurani column had followed, though the forest amplified the noise and confused

its source.

Martin said, "Do you still wear that . . . ridiculous red undertunic?"

"Yes, why?"

"Tear off a strip." Garret pulled his knife without question and lifted up his green forester's tunic. Underneath was a garish red cotton undertunic.

He cut a long strip off the bottom, then hastily tucked the undertunic in. While Garret ordered himself, Martin tied the strip to an arrow. He looked back to where the Tsurani thrashed in the brush. "It must be those stubby legs. They may be able to run all day, but they can't keep up in the woods." He handed the arrow to Garret. "See that large elm across that small clearing?"

Garret nodded. "See the small birch behind, off to the left?" Again

Garret nodded. "Think you can hit it with that rag dragging at your arrow?"

Garret grinned as he unslung his bow, notched the arrow, and let fly.

The arrow sped true, striking the tree. Martin said, "When our bandy-legged friends get here, they'll see that flicker of color over there and go charging across. Unless I'm sadly mistaken, the Brothers are about fifty feet the other side of your arrow." He pulled his horn as Garret shouldered his bow again. "Once more we're off" he said, blowing a long, loud call.

Like hornets the Tsurani descended, but Longbow and Garret were off to the southwest before the note from the hunter's horn had died in the air. They dashed to be gone before the Tsurani caught sight of them, aborting the hoax. Suddenly they broke through a thicket and ran into a group of women and children milling about. One young woman of the Brotherhood was placing a bundle upon the ground. She stopped at the sight of the two men. Garret had to slide to a halt to keep from bowling her over.

Her large brown eyes studied him for an instant as he stepped sideways to get around her. Without thinking, Garret said, "Excuse me, ma'am," and raised his hand to his forelock. Then he was off after the Huntmaster as shouts of surprise and anger erupted behind them.

Martin called a halt after they had covered another quarter mile and listened. To the northeast came the sounds of battle, shouts and screams, and the ring of weapons. Martin grinned. "They'll both be busy for a while."

Garret sank wearily to the ground and said, "Next time send me to the castle, will you, Huntmaster?"

Martin kneeled beside the tracker. "That should prevent the Tsurani from reaching Crydee until sundown or after. They won't be able to mount an attack until tomorrow. Four hundred Dark Brothers are not something they can safely leave at their rear. We'll rest a bit, then make for Crydee."

Garret leaned back against a tree. "Welcome news." He let out a long sigh of relief, "That was a close thing, Huntmaster."

Martin smiled enigmatically. "All life is a close thing, Garret."

Garret shook his head slowly. "Did you see that girl?"

Martin nodded. "What of her?"

Garret looked perplexed. "She was pretty . . . no, closer to being

beautiful, in a strange sort of way, I mean. But she had long black hair, and her eyes were the color of otter's fur. And she had a pouty mouth and pert look. Enough to warrant a second glance from most men. It's not what I would have expected from the Brotherhood."

Martin nodded. "The moredhel are a pretty people, in truth, as are the elves. But remember, Garret," he said with a smile, "should you chance to find yourself exchanging pleasantries with a moredhel woman again, she'd as soon cut your heart out as kiss you."

They rested for a while as cries and shouts echoed from the northeast.

Then slowly they stood and began the return to Crydee.

SINCE THE START of the war, the Tsurani had confined their activities to those areas immediately adjacent the valley in the Grey Towers. Reports from the dwarves and the elves revealed mining activities were taking place in the Grey Towers. Enclaves had been thrown up outside the valley, from which they raided Kingdom positions. Once or twice during the year they would mount an offensive against the Dukes' Armies of the West, the elves in Elvandar, or Crydee, but for the most part they were content to hold what they had already taken.

And each year they would expand their holdings, building more enclaves, expanding the area under their control, and gaining themselves a stronger position from which to conduct the next year's campaign.

Since the fall of Walinor, the expected thrust toward the coast of the Bitter Sea had not materialized, nor had the Tsurani again tried for the LaMutian fortresses near Stone Mountain. Walinor and Crydee town were sacked and abandoned, more to deny them to the Kingdom and Free Cities than for any Tsurani gain. By the spring of the third year of the war, the leaders of the Kingdom forces despaired of a major attack, one that might break the stalemate. Now it came. And it came at the logical place, the allies' weakest front, the garrison at Crydee.

Arutha looked out over the walls at the Tsurani army. He stood next to Gardan and Fannon, with Martin Longbow behind. "How many?" he asked, not taking his eyes from the gathering host.

Martin spoke. "Fifteen hundred, two thousand, it is hard to judge.

There were two thousand more coming yesterday, less whatever the Dark Brotherhood took with them."

From the distant woods the sounds of workmen felling trees rang out.

The Swordmaster and Huntmaster judged the Tsurani were cutting trees to build scaling ladders.

Martin said, "I'd never thought to hear myself say such, but I wish there'd been four thousand Dark Brothers in the forest yesterday."

Gardan spat over the wall. "Still, you did well, Huntmaster. It is only fitting they should run afoul of each other."

Martin chuckled humorlessly. "It is also a good thing the Dark Brothers kill on sight. Though I am sure they do it out of no love for us, they do guard our southern flank."

Arutha said, "Unless yesterday's band was not an isolated case. If the Brotherhood is abandoning the Green Heart, we may soon have to fear for Tulan, Jonril, and Carse."

"I'm glad they've not parleyed," said Fannon. "If they should truce .

Martin shook his head. "The moredhel will traffic only with weapons runners and renegades who will serve them for gold. Otherwise they have no use for us. And by all evidence, the Tsurani are bent on conquest. The moredhel are no more spared their ambition than we are."

Fannon looked back at the mounting Tsurani force. Brightly colored standards with symbols and designs strange to behold were placed at various positions along the leading edge of the army. Hundreds of warriors in different-colored armor stood in groups under each banner.

A horn sounded, and the Tsurani soldiers faced the walls. Each standard was brought forward a dozen paces and planted in the ground. A handful of soldiers wearing the high-crested helmets that the Kingdom forces took to denote officers walked forward and stood half-way between the army and the standard-bearers. One, wearing bright blue armor, called something and pointed at the castle. A shout went up from the assembled Tsurani host, and then another officer, this one in bright red armor, began to walk slowly up to the castle.

Arutha and the others watched in silence while the man crossed the distance to the gate. He looked neither right nor left, nor up at the people on the walls, but marched with eyes straight ahead until he reached the gate. There he took out a large hand ax and banged three times upon it with the haft.

"What is he doing?" asked Roland, just come up the stairs.

Again the Tsurani pounded on the gates of the castle. "I think," said Longbow, "he's ordering us to open up and quit the castle."

Then the Tsurani reached back and slammed his ax into the gate, leaving it quivering in the wood. Without hurrying, he turned and began walking away to cheers from the watching Tsurani.

"What now?" asked Fannon.

"I think I know," said Martin, unshouldering his bow. He drew out an arrow and fitted it to the bowstring. With a sudden pull, he let fly. The shaft struck the ground between the Tsurani officer's legs and the man halted.

"The Hadati hillmen of Yabon have rituals like this," said Martin.

"They put great store by showing bravery in the face of an enemy. To touch one and live is more honorable than killing him." He pointed toward the officer who stood motionless. "If I kill him, I have no honor, because he's showing us all how brave he is. But we can show we know how to play this game."

The Tsurani officer turned and picked up the arrow and snapped it in two. He faced the castle, holding the broken arrow high as he shouted defiance at those on the walls. Longbow sighted another arrow and let fly. The second arrow sped down and sliced the plume from the officer's helmet. The Tsurani fell silent as feathers began drifting down around his face.

Roland whooped at the shot, and then the walls of the castle erupted with cheers. The Tsurani slowly removed his helm.

Martin said, "Now he's inviting one of us either to kill him, showing we are without honor, or to come out of the castle and dare to face him."

Fannon said, "I will not allow the gates open over some childish contest!"

Longbow grinned as he said, "Then we'll change the rules." He leaned over the edge of the walkway and shouted down to the courtyard below. "Garret, fowling blunt!"

Garret, in the court below, drew a fowling arrow from his quiver and tossed it up to Longbow. Martin showed the others the heavy iron ball that served as the tip, used to stun game birds where a sharp arrow would destroy them, and then fitted it to his bow. Sighting the officer, he let fly.

The arrow took the Tsurani officer in the stomach, knocking him backward. All on the wall could imagine the sound made as the man had his breath knocked from him. The Tsurani soldiers shouted in outrage then quieted as the man stood up, obviously stunned but otherwise showing no injury. Then he doubled over, his hands on his knees, and vomited.

Arutha said dryly, "So much for an officer's dignity."

"Well," said Fannon, "I think it is time to give them another lesson in Kingdom warfare." He raised his arm high above his head. "Catapults!" he cried.

Answering flags waved from the tops of the towers along the walls and atop the keep. He dropped his arm and the mighty engines were fired. On the smaller towers, ballistae, looking like giant crossbows, shot spearlike missiles, while atop the keep, huge mangonels flung buckets of heavy stones. The rain of stones and missiles landed amid the Tsurani, crushing heads and limbs, tearing ragged holes in their lines. The screams of wounded men could be heard by the defenders, while the catapult crew quickly rewound and loaded their deadly engines.

The Tsurani milled about in confusion and, when the second flight of stones and missiles struck, broke and ran. A cheer went up from the defenders on the wall, then died when the Tsurani regrouped beyond the range of the engines.

Gardan said, "Swordmaster, I think they mean to wait us out."

"I think you're wrong," said Arutha, pointing.

The other looked: a

large number of Tsurani detached themselves from the main body, moving forward to stop just outside missile range.

"They look to be readying an attack," said Fannon, "but why with only a part of their force?"

A soldier appeared and said, "Highness, there are no signs of Tsurani along any of the other positions."

Arutha looked to Fannon. "And why attack only one wall?" After a few minutes, Arutha said, "I'd judge a thousand."

"More likely twelve hundred," said Fannon. He saw scaling ladders appearing at the rear of the attackers, moving forward. "Anytime now."

A thousand defenders waited inside the walls. Other men of Crydee still manned outlying garrisons and lookout positions, but the bulk of the Duchy's strength was here. Fannon said, "We can withstand this force as long as the walls remain unbreached. Less than a ten-to-one advantage we can deal with."

More messengers came from the other walls. "They still mount nothing along the east, north, and south, Swordmaster," one reported.



"They seem determined to do this the hard way." Fannon looked thoughtful for a moment. "Little of what we've seen is understandable. Death raids, marshaling within catapult range, wasting time with games of honor. Still, they are not without skill, and we can take nothing for granted." To the guard he said, "Pass the word to keep alert on the other walls, and be ready to move to defend should this prove a feint."

The messengers left, and the waiting continued. The sun moved across the sky, until an hour before sunset, when it sat at the backs of the attackers. Suddenly horns blew and drums beat, and in a rush the Tsurani broke toward the walls. The catapults sang, and great holes appeared in the lines of attackers. Still they came, until they moved within bow range of the patiently waiting defenders. A storm of arrows fell upon the attackers, and to a man the front rank collapsed, but those behind came on, large brightly colored shields held overhead as they rushed the walls. A half-dozen times men fell, dropping scaling ladders, only to have others grab them up and continue.

Tsurani bowmen answered the bowmen from the walls with their own shower of arrows, and men of Crydee fell from the battlements. Arutha ducked behind the walls of the castle as the arrows sped overhead, then he risked a glance between the merlons of the wall. A horde of attackers filled his field of vision, and a ladder top suddenly appeared before him. A soldier near the Prince grabbed the ladder top and pushed it away, aided by a second using a pole arm. Arutha could hear the screams of the Tsurani as they fell from the ladder. The first soldier to the ladder then fell backward, a Tsurani arrow protruding from his eye, and disappeared into the courtyard.

A sudden shout went up from below, and Arutha sprang to his feet, risking a bowshaft by looking down. All along the base of the wall, Tsurani warriors were withdrawing, running back to the safety of their own lines.

"What are they doing?" wondered Fannon.

The Tsurani ran until they were safe from the catapults, then stopped, turned, and formed up ranks. Officers were walking up and down before the men, exhorting them. After a moment the assembled Tsurani cheered.

"Damn me!" came from Arutha's left, and he glimpsed Amos Trask at his shoulder, a seaman's cutlass in his hand. "The maniacs are congratulating themselves on getting slaughtered."

The scene below was grisly. Tsurani soldiers lay scattered around like toys thrown by a careless giant child. A few moved feebly and moaned, but most were dead.

Fannon said, "I'd wager they lost a hundred or more. This makes no sense." He said to Roland and Martin, "Check the other walls." They both hurried off. "What are they doing now?" he said as he watched the Tsurani. In the red glow of sunset, he could see them still in lines, while men lit torches and passed them around. "Surely they don't intend to attack after sunset? They'll fall over themselves in the dark."

"Who knows what they plan?" said Arutha. "I've never heard of an attack being staged this badly."

Amos said, "Beggin' the Prince's pardon, but I know a thing or two

about warcraft-from my younger days-and I've also never heard of this like before. Even the Keshians, who'll throw away dog soldiers like a drunken seaman throws away his money, even they wouldn't try a frontal assault like this. I'd keep a weather eye out for trickery."

"Yes," answered Arutha. "But of what sort?"

ThROUGHOut THE Night the Tsurani attacked, rushing headlong against the walls, to die at the base. Once a few made the top of the walls, but they were quickly killed and the ladders thrown back. With dawn the Tsurani withdrew.

Arutha, Fannon, and Gardan watched as the Tsurani reached the safety of their own lines, beyond catapult and bow range. With the sunrise a sea of colorful tents appeared, and the Tsurani retired to their campsites. The defenders were astonished at the number of Tsurani dead along the base of the castle walls.

After a few hours the stink of the dead became overpowering. Fannon consulted with an exhausted Arutha as the Prince was readying for an overdue sleep. "The Tsurani have made no attempt to reclaim their fallen."

Arutha said, "We have no common language in which to parley, unless you mean to send Tully out under a flag of truce."

Fannon said, "He'd go, of course, but I'd not risk him. Still, the bodies could be trouble in a day or two. Besides the stink and flies, with unburied dead comes disease. It's the gods' way of showing their displeasure over not honoring the dead."

"Then," said Arutha, pulling on the boot he had just taken off, "we had best see what can be done."

He returned to the gate and found Gardan already making plans to remove the bodies. A dozen volunteers were waiting by the gate to go and gather the dead for a funeral pyre.

Arutha and Fannon reached the walls as Gardan led the men through the gate. Archers lined the walls to cover the retreat of the men outside the walls if necessary, but it soon became evident the Tsurani were not going to trouble the party. Several came to the edge of their lines, to sit and watch the Kingdom soldiers working.

After a half hour it was clear the men of Crydee would not be able to complete the work before they were exhausted. Arutha considered sending more men outside, but Fannon refused thinking it what the Tsurani were waiting for. "If we have to move a large party back through the gate, it might prove disastrous. If we close the gate, we lose men outside, and if we leave it open too long, the Tsurani breach the castle."

Arutha was forced to agree, and they settled down to watch Gardan's men working in the hot morning.

Then, near midday, a dozen Tsurani warriors, unarmed, walked casually across their lines and approached the work party. Those on the wall watched tensely, but when the Tsurani reached the spot where Crydee men worked, they silently began picking up bodies and carrying them to where the pyre was being erected.

With the help of the Tsurani, the bodies were stacked upon the huge pyre. Torches were set, and soon the bodies of the slain were consumed in fire. The Tsurani who had helped place the bodies upon the pyre

watched as the soldier who led the volunteers stood away from the mounting flames. Then one Tsurani soldier spoke a word, and he and his companions bowed in respect to those upon the fire. The soldier who led the Crydee soldiers said, "Honors to the dead!" The twelve men of Crydee assumed a posture of attention and saluted. Then the Tsurani turned to face the Kingdom soldiers and again they bowed. The commanding soldier called out, "Return salute!" and the twelve men of Crydee saluted the Tsurani.

Arutha shook his head, watching men who had tried to kill one another working side by side as if it were the most natural thing in the world, then saluting one another. "Father used to say that, among man's strange undertakings, war stood clearly forth as the strangest."

AT suNDOWN they came again, wave after wave of attackers, rushing the west wall, to die at the base. Four times during the night they struck, and four times they were repulsed.

Now they came again, and Arutha shrugged off his fatigue to fight once more. They could see more Tsurani joining those before the castle, long snakes of torchlight coming from the forest to the north. After the last assault, it was clear the situation was shifting to the Tsurani's favor.

The defenders were exhausted from two nights of fighting, and the Tsurani were still throwing fresh troops into the fray.

"They mean to grind us down, no matter what the cost," said a fatigued Fannon. He began to say something to a guard when a strange expression crossed his face. He closed his eyes and collapsed. Arutha caught him. An arrow protruded from his back. A panicky-looking soldier kneeling on the other side looked at Arutha, clearly asking: What do we do?

Arutha shouted, "Get him into the keep, to Father Tully," and the man and another soldier picked up the unconscious Swordmaster and carried him down. A third soldier asked, "What orders, Highness?" Arutha spun around, seeing the worried faces of Crydee's soldiers nearby, and said, "As before. Defend the wall."

The fighting went hard. A half-dozen times Arutha found himself dueling with Tsurani warriors who topped the wall. Then, after a timeless battling, the Tsurani withdrew.

Arutha stood panting, his clothing drenched with perspiration beneath his chest armor. He shouted for water, and a castle porter arrived with a bucket. He drank, as did the others around, and turned to watch the Tsurani host.

Again they stood just beyond catapult range, and their torchlights seemed undiminished. "Prince Arutha" came a voice behind. He spun around. Horsemaster Algon was standing before him. "I just heard of Fannon's wound."

Arutha said, "How is he?"

"A close thing. The wound is serious, but not yet fatal. Tully thinks should he live another day, he will recover. But he will not be able to command for weeks, perhaps longer."

Arutha knew Algon was waiting for a decision from him. The Prince was Knight-Captain of the King's army and, without Fannon, the commander

of the garrison. He was also untried and could turn over command to the Horsemaster. Arutha looked around. "Where is Gardan?" "Here, Highness," came a shout from a short way down the wall. Arutha was surprised at the sergeant's appearance. His dark skin was nearly grey from the dust that stuck to it, held fast by the sheen of perspiration. His tunic and tabard were soaked with blood, which also covered his arms to the elbows.

Arutha looked down at his own hands and arms and found them likewise covered. He shouted, "More water!" and said to Algon, "Gardan will act as my second commander. Should anything happen to me, he will take command of the garrison. Gardan is acting Swordmaster."

Algon hesitated as if about to say something, then a look of relief crossed his face. "Yes, Highness. Orders?" Arutha looked back toward the Tsurani lines, then to the east. The first light of the false dawn was coming, and the sun would rise over the mountains in less than two hours. He seemed to weigh facts for a time, as he washed away the blood on his arms and face. Finally he said, "Get Longbow."

The Huntmaster was called for and arrived a few minutes later, followed by Amos Trask, who wore a wide grin. "Damn me, but they can fight," said the seaman.

Arutha ignored the comment. "It is clear to me they plan to keep constant pressure upon us. With as little regard as they show for their own lives, they can wear us down in a few weeks. This is one thing we didn't count upon, this willingness of their men to go to certain death. I want the north, south, and east walls stripped. Leave enough men to keep watch, and hold any attackers until reinforcements can arrive. Bring the men from the other walls here and order those here to stand down. I want six-hour watches rotated throughout the rest of the day. Martin, has there been any more word of Dark Brother migration?" Longbow shrugged. "We've been a little busy, Highness. My men have all been in the north woods the last few weeks."

Arutha said, "Could you slip a few trackers over the walls before first light?"

Longbow considered. "If they leave at once, and if the Tsurani aren't watching the east wall too closely, yes.."

"Do so. The Dark Brothers aren't foolish enough to attack this force, but if you could find a few bands the size of the one you spotted three days ago and repeat your trap . . ."

Martin grinned. "I'll lead them out myself. We'd best leave now, before it gets much lighter." Arutha dismissed him, and Martin ran down the stairs. "Garret!" he shouted. "Come on, lad. We're off for some fun." A groan could be heard by those on the wall as Martin gathered his trackers around him.

Arutha said to Gardan, "I want messages sent to Carse and Tulan. Use five pigeons for each. Order Barons Bellamy and Tolburt to strip their garrisons and take ship for Crydee at once."

Gardan said, "Highness, that will leave those garrisons nearly undefended."

Algon joined in the objection. "If the Dark Brotherhood moves toward the Northlands, the Tsurani will have an open path to the southern keeps next year."

Arutha said, "If the Dark Brothers are moving en masse, which they may not be, and if the Tsurani learn they have abandoned the Green Heart, which they may not. I am concerned by this known threat, not a possible one next year. If they keep this constant pressure upon us, how long can we withstand?"

Gardan said, "A few weeks, perhaps a month. No longer."

Arutha once more studied the Tsurani camp. "They boldly pitch their tents near the edge of town. They range through our forests, building ladders and siege engines no doubt. They know we cannot sally forth in strength. But with eighteen hundred fresh soldiers from the southern keeps attacking up the coast road from the beaches and the garrison sallying forth, we can rout them from Crydee. Once the siege is broken, they will have to withdraw to their eastern enclaves. We can harry them continuously with horsemen, keep them from regrouping. Then we can return those forces to the southern keeps, and they'll be ready for any Tsurani attacks against Carse or Tulan next spring."

Gardan said, "A bold enough plan, Highness." He saluted and left the wall, followed by Algon.

Amos Trask said, "Your commanders are cautious men, Highness."

Arutha' said, "You agree with my plan?"

"Should Crydee fall, what matters when Carse or Tulan falls? If not this year, then next for certain. It might as well be in one fight as two or three. As the sergeant said, it is a bold plan. Still, a ship was never taken without getting close enough to board. You have the makings of a fine corsair should you ever grow tired of being a Prince, Highness."

Arutha regarded Amos Trask with a skeptical smile. "Corsair, is it? I thought you claimed to be an honest trader."

Amos looked slightly discomposd. Then he broke out in a hearty

laugh. "I only said I had a cargo for Crydee, Highness. I never said how I came by it."

"Well, we have no time for your piratical past now."

Amos looked stung. "No pirate, Sire. The Sidonie was carrying letters of marque from Great Kesh, given by the governor of Durbin."

Arutha laughed. "Of course! And everyone knows there is no finer, more law-abiding group upon the high seas than the captains of the Durbin coast."

Amos shrugged. "They tend to be a crusty lot, it's true. And they sometimes make free with the concept of free passage on the high seas, but we prefer the term privateer. "

Horns blew and drums beat, and with shrieking war cries the Tsurani came. The defenders waited, then as the attacking host crossed the invisible line marking the outer range of the castle's war engines, death rained down upon the Tsurani. Still they came.

The Tsurani crossed the second invisible line marking the outer range of the castle's bowmen, and scores more died. Still they came.

The attackers reached the walls, and defenders dropped stones and pushed over scaling ladders, dealing out death to those below. Still they

came.

Arutha quickly ordered a redeployment of his reserves, directing them to be ready near the points of heaviest attack. Men hurried to carry out his orders.

Standing atop the west wall, in the thick of the fight, Arutha answered attack with attack, repulsing warrior after warrior as they reached the top of the wall. Even in the midst of battle, Arutha was aware of the scene around him, shouting orders, hearing replies, catching glimpses of what others were doing. He saw Amos Trask, disarmed, strike a Tsurani full in the face with his fist, knocking the man from the wall. Trask then carefully bent down and picked up his cutlass as if he had simply dropped it while strolling along the wall. Gardan moved among the men, exhorting the defenders, bolstering sagging spirits, and driving the men beyond the point where they would normally have given in to exhaustion.

Arutha helped two soldiers push away another scaling ladder, then stared in momentary confusion as one of the men slowly turned and sat at his feet, surprise on his face as he looked down at the Tsurani bowshaft in his chest. The man leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes as if deciding to sleep for a time.

Arutha heard someone shout his name. Gardan stood a few feet away, pointing to the north section of the west wall. "They've crested the wall."

Arutha ran past Gardan, shouting, "Order the reserves to follow!" He raced along the wall until he reached the breach in the defenses. A dozen Tsurani held each end of a section of the wall, pushing forward to clear room for their comrades to follow. Arutha hurled himself into the front rank, past weary and surprised guards who were being forced back along the battlement. Arutha thrust over the first Tsurani shield, taking the man in the throat. The Tsurani's face registered shock, then he keeled over and fell into the courtyard below. Arutha attacked the man next to the first and shouted, "For Crydee! For the Kingdom!"

Then Gardan was among them, like a towering black giant, dealing blows to all who stood before. Suddenly the men of Crydee pressed forward, a wave of flesh and steel along the narrow rampart. The Tsurani stood their ground, refusing to yield the hard-won breach, and to a man were killed.

Arutha struck a Tsurani warrior with the bell guard of his rapier, knocking him to the ground below, and turned to find the wall once more in the possession of the defenders. Horns blew from the Tsurani lines, and the attackers withdrew.

Arutha became aware the sun had cleared the mountains to the east. The morning had finally come. He surveyed the scene below and felt suddenly more fatigued than he could ever remember. Turning slowly, he saw every man on the wall was watching him. Then one of the soldiers shouted, "Hail, Arutha! Hail, Prince of Crydee!"

Suddenly the castle was ringing with shouts as men chanted, "Arutha! Arutha!"

To Gardan, Arutha asked, "Why?"

With a satisfied look the sergeant replied "They saw you personally take the fight to the Tsurani, Highness, or heard from others. They are

soldiers and expect certain things from a commander. They are now truly your men, Highness."

Arutha stood quietly as the cheers filled the castle. Then he raised his hand and the courtyard fell silent. "You have done well. Crydee is served aright by her soldiers." He spoke to Gardan. "Change the watch upon the walls. We may have little time to enjoy the victory."

As if his words were an omen, a shout came from a guard atop the nearest tower. "Highness, 'ware the field."

Arutha saw the Tsurani lines had been re-formed. Wearily he said, "Have they no limit?"

Instead of the expected attack, a single man walked from the Tsurani line, apparently an officer by his crested helm. He pointed to the walls, and the entire Tsurani line erupted in cheers. He walked farther, within bow range, stopping several times to point at the wall. His blue armor glinted in the morning sun as the attackers cheered with his gestures toward the castle.

"A challenge?" said Gardan, watching the strange display as the man showed his back, unmindful of personal danger, and walked back to his own lines.

"No," said Amos Trask, who came to stand next to Gardan. "I think they salute a brave enemy." Amos shook his head slightly. "A strange people. "

Arutha said, "Shall we ever understand such men?"

Gardan put his hand upon Arutha's shoulder. "I doubt it. Look, they quit the field."

The Tsurani were marching back toward their tents before the remains of Crydee town. A few watchmen were left to observe the castle, but it was clear the main force was being ordered to stand down again. Gardan said, "I would have ordered another assault." His voice betrayed his disbelief. "They have to know we are near exhaustion. Why not press the attack?" Amos

said, "Who can say. Perhaps they, too, are tired."

Arutha said, "This attacking through the night has some meaning I do not understand." He shook his head. "In time we will know what they plot. Leave a watch upon the walls, but have the men retire to the courtyard. It is becoming clear they prefer not to attack during the day. Order food brought from the kitchen, and water to bathe with." Orders were passed, and men left their posts, some sitting on the walks below the wall, too tired to trudge down the steps. Others reached the courtyard and tossed aside their weapons, sitting in the shade of the battlements while castle porters hurried among them with buckets of fresh water. Arutha leaned against the wall. He spoke silently to himself.

"They'll be back."

They came again that night.

18

SIEGE

WouNDED MEN GROANED AT SUNRISE.

For the twelfth straight night the Tsurani had assaulted the castle, only to retire at dawn. Gardan could not see any clear reason for the dangerous night attacks. As he watched the Tsurani gathering up their dead, then returning to their tents he said "They are strange. Their archers cannot fire at the walls once the ladders are up for fear of hitting their own men. We have no such problem, knowing everyone below is the enemy. I don't understand these men."

Arutha sat numbly washing the blood and dirt from his face, oblivious to the scene about him. He was too tired even to answer Gardan. "Here," a voice nearby said, and he pulled the damp cloth from his face to see a proffered drinking cup. He took the cup and drained it in one long pull, savoring the taste of strong wine.

Carline stood before him, wearing tunic and trousers, her sword hanging at her side. "What are you doing here?" Arutha asked, fatigue making his voice sound harsh in his own ears.

Carline's manner was brisk. "Someone must carry water and food. . . With every man on the walls all night long, who do you think is fit for duty in the morning? Not that pitiful handful of porters who are too old for fighting, that is certain."

Arutha looked about and saw other women, ladies of the castle as well as servants and fishwives, walking among the men, who thankfully took the offered food and drink. He smiled his crooked smile. "How fare you?"

"Well enough. Still, sitting in the cellar is as difficult in its own way as being on the wall, I judge. Each sound of battle that reaches us brings one or another of the ladies to tears." Her voice carried a tone of mild disapproval. "They huddle like rabbits. Oh, it is so tiresome." She stood quietly for a moment, then asked, "Have you seen Roland?"

He looked about. "Last night for a time." He covered his face in the soothing wetness of the cloth. Pulling it away after a moment, he added, "Or perhaps it was two nights past. I've lost track." He pointed toward the wall nearest the keep. "He should be over there somewhere. I put him in charge of the off watch. He is responsible for guarding against a flank attack."

Carline smiled. She knew Roland would be chafing to get into the fight, but with his responsibilities it would be unlikely unless the Tsurani attacked on all sides. "Thank you, Arutha."

Arutha feigned ignorance. "For what?"

She kneeled and kissed his wet cheek. "For knowing me better than I know myself sometimes." She stood and walked away.

RoLAND WALKED ALoNg the battlements, watching the distant forest beyond the broad clearing that ran along the eastern wall of the castle. He approached a guard standing next to an alarm bell and said, "Anything?"

"Nothing, Squire."

Roland nodded. "Keep a watchful eye. This is the narrowest open area before the wall. If they come against a second flank, this is where I would expect the assault."



The soldier said, "In truth, Squire. Why do they come only against one wall, and why the strongest?"

Roland shrugged. "I don't pretend to know. Perhaps to show contempt, or bravery. Or for some alien reason."

The guard came to attention and saluted. Carline had come silently up behind them. Roland took her by the arm and hurried her along.

"What do you think you're doing up here?" he said in ungentle tones.

Her look of relief at finding him alive and unhurt turned to one of anger. "I came to see if you were all right," she said defiantly.

Guiding her down the stairs to the courtyard below, he answered, "We're not so far removed from the forest a Tsurani Bowman could not reduce the Duke's household by one. I'll not explain to your father and brothers what my reasons were for allowing you up there."

"Oh! Is that your only reason? You don't want to face Father."

He smiled and his voice softened. "No. Of course not."

She returned the smile. "I was worried."

Roland sat upon the lower steps and plucked at some weeds growing near the base of the stones, pulling them out and tossing them aside.

"Little reason for that. Arutha has seen I'll not risk much."

Placatingly, Carline said, "Still, this is an important post. If they attack here, you'll have to hold with a small number until reinforcements come."

"If they attack. Gardan came by yesterday, and he thinks they may tire of this soon and dig in for a long siege, waiting for us to starve."

She said, "More's their hard luck, then. We've stores through the winter, and they'll find little to forage out there once the snows come."

Playfully mocking, he said, "What have we here? A student of tactics?"

She regarded him like an overtaxed teacher confronted with a particularly slow student. "I listen, and I have my wits about me. Do you think I do nothing but sit around waiting for you men to tell me what is occurring? If I did, I'd know nothing."

He put up his hands in sign of supplication. "I'm sorry, Carline. You are most definitely no one's fool." He stood and took her hand. "But you have made me your fool."

She squeezed his hand. "No, Roland, I have been the fool. It has taken me almost three years to understand just how good a man you are. And how good a friend." She leaned over and kissed him lightly. He returned the kiss with tenderness. "And more," she added quietly.

"When this is over . . ." he began.

She placed her free hand over his lips. "Not now, Roland. Not now."

He smiled his understanding. "I'd best be back to the walls, Carline."

She kissed him again and left for the main courtyard and the work to be done. He climbed back to the wall and resumed his vigil.

IT WAS LATE afternoon when a guard shouted, "Squire! In the forest!" Roland looked in the indicated direction and saw two figures sprinting across the open ground. From the trees the shouts of men came, and the clamor of battle.

Crydee bowmen raised their weapons, then Roland shouted, "Hold!

It's Longbow!" To the guard next to him he said, "Bring ropes, quickly."

Longbow and Garret reached the wall as the ropes were being lowered

and, as soon as they were secured, scrambled upward. When they were safely over the walls, they sank exhaustedly behind the battlements. Waterskins were handed the two foresters, who drank deeply.

"What now?" asked Roland.

Longbow gave him a lopsided smile. "We found another band of travelers heading northward about thirty miles southeast of here and arranged for them to visit with the Tsurani."

Garret looked up at Roland with eyes darkly circled from fatigue. "A band he calls it. Damn near five hundred moredhel moving in strength. Must have been a full hundred chasing us through the woods the last two days."

Roland said, "Arutha will be pleased. The Tsurani have hit us each night since you left. We could do with a little diverting of their attentions."

Longbow nodded. "Where's the Prince?"

"At the west wall, where all the fighting's been."

Longbow stood and pulled the exhausted Garret to his feet. "Come along. We'd better report."

Roland instructed the guards to keep a sharp watch and followed the two huntsmen. They found Arutha supervising the distribution of weapons to those in need of replacing broken or dulled ones. Gardell, the smith, and his apprentices gathered up those that were reparable and dumped them into a cart, heading for the forge to begin work.

Longbow said, "Highness, another band of moredhel have come north. I led them here, so the Tsurani could be too busy to attack tonight."

Arutha said, "That is welcome news. Come, we'll have a cup of wine, and you can tell of what you saw."

Longbow sent Garret off to the kitchen and followed Arutha and Roland into the keep. The Prince sent word asking Gardan to join them in the council room and, when they were all there, asked Longbow to recount his travels.

Longbow drank deeply from the wine cup placed before him. "It was touch and go for a while. The woods are thick with both Tsurani and moredhel. And there are many signs they have little affection for one another. We counted at least a hundred dead on both sides."

Arutha looked at the other three men. "We know little of their ways, but it seems foolish for them to travel so close to Crydee."

Longbow shook his head. "They have little choice, Highness. The Green Heart must be foraged clean, and they cannot return to their mountains because of the Tsurani. The moredhel are making for the Northlands and won't risk passing near Elvandar. With the rest of the way blocked by the Tsurani strength, their only path is through the forests nearby, then westward along the river toward the coast. Once they reach the sea, they can turn northward again. They must gain the Great Northern Mountains before winter to reach their brothers in the Northlands safely."

He drank the rest of his cup and waited while a servant refilled it.

"From all signs, nearly every moredhel in the south is making for the Northlands. It looks as if over a thousand have already safely been by here. How many more will come this way through the summer and fall,

we cannot guess." He drank again. "The Tsurani will have to watch their eastern flank and would do well to watch the south as well. The moredhel are starved and might chance a raid into the Tsurani camp while the bulk of the army is thrown against the walls of the castle. Should a three-way fight occur, it could get messy."

"For the Tsurani," said Gardan.

Martin hoisted his cup in salute. "For the Tsurani."

Arutha said, "You've done well, Huntmaster."

"Thank you, Highness." He laughed. "I'd never thought to see the day I'd welcome sight of the Dark Brotherhood in the forests of Crydee."

Arutha drummed his fingers upon the table. "It will be another two to three weeks before we can expect the armies from Tulan and Carse. If the Dark Brothers harry the Tsurani enough, we might have some respite."

He looked at Martin. "What occurs to the east?"

Longbow spread his hands upon the table. "We couldn't get close enough to see much as we hurried past, but they are up to something. They've a good number of men scattered throughout the woods from the edge of the clearing back about a half mile. If it hadn't been for the moredhel hot on our heels, Garret and I might not have made it back to the walls."

"I wish I knew what they were doing out there," said Arutha. "This attacking only at night, it surely masks some trickery."

Gardan said, "We'll know soon enough, I fear."

Arutha stood, and the others rose as well. "We have much to do in any event. But if they do not come this night, we should all take advantage of the rest. Order watches posted, and send the men back to the commons for sleep. If I'm needed, I'll be in my room."

The others followed him from the council hall, and Arutha walked slowly to his room, his fatigued mind trying to grasp what he knew were important matters, but failing. He threw off only his armor and fell fully clothed across his pallet. He was quickly asleep, but it was a troubled, dream-filled slumber.

For a week no attacks came, as the Tsurani were cautious of the migrating Brotherhood of the Dark Path. As Martin had foretold, the moredhel were emboldened by hunger and had twice struck into the heart of the Tsurani camp.

On the eighth afternoon after the first moredhel attack, the Tsurani were again gathering on the field before the castle their ranks once more swelled by reinforcements from the east. Messages carried by pigeon between Arutha and his father told of increased fighting along the eastern front as well. Lord Borric speculated Crydee was being attacked by troops fresh from the Tsurani homeworld, as there had been no reports of any troop movements along his front. Other messages arrived with word of relief from Carse and Tulan. Baron Tolburt's soldiers had departed Tulan within two days of receiving Arutha's message, and his fleet would join with Baron Bellamy's at Carse. Depending upon the prevailing winds, it would be from one to two weeks before the relief fleet arrived.

Arutha stood at his usual place upon the west wall, Martin Longbow at his side. They watched the Tsurani taking position as the sun sank in

the west, a red beacon bathing the landscape in crimson.

"It seems," said Arutha, "they mount a full attack tonight."

Longbow said, "They've cleared the area of troublesome neighbors by all appearances, at least for a time. The moredhel gained us a little time, Highness, but no more."

"I wonder how many will reach the Northlands?"

Longbow shrugged. "One in five perhaps. From the Green Heart to the Northlands is a long, difficult journey under the best of circumstances.

Now . . ." He let his words trail off.

Gardan came up the stairs from the courtyard. "Highness, the tower watch reports the Tsurani are in formation."

As he spoke, the Tsurani sounded their battle calls and began to advance. Arutha drew his sword and gave the order for the catapults to fire. Bowmen followed, unleashing a storm of arrows upon the attackers, but still the Tsurani came.

Through the night, wave after wave of brightly armored aliens threw themselves at the west wall of Castle Crydee. Most died on the field before the wall, or at its base, but a few managed to crest the battlements.

They, too, died. Still, more came.

Six times the Tsurani wave had broken upon the defenses of Crydee, and now they prepared for a seventh assault. Arutha, covered in dirt and blood, directed the disposition of rested troops along the wall. Gardan looked to the east. "If we hold one more time, the dawn will be here. Then we should have some respite," he said, his voice thick with fatigue.

"We will hold," answered Arutha, his own voice sounding just as tired in his ears as Gardan's.

"Arutha?"

Arutha saw Roland and Amos coming up the stairs, with another man behind. "What now?" asked the Prince.

Roland said, "We can see no activity on the other walls, but there is something here you should see."

Arutha recognized the other man, Lewis, the castle's Rathunter. It was his responsibility to keep vermin from the keep. He tenderly held something in his hands.

Arutha looked closely: it was a ferret, twitching slightly in the firelight.

"Highness," said Lewis, his voice thick with emotion, "it's-"

"What, man?" said Arutha impatiently. With attack about to begin, he had little time to mourn a lost pet.

Roland spoke, for Lewis was obviously overcome at the loss of his ferret. "The Rathunter's ferrets didn't return two days ago. This one crawled into the storage room behind the kitchen sometime since. Lewis found it there a few minutes ago."

In choked tones, Lewis said, "They're all well trained, sire. If they didn't come back, it's because something kept them from returning. This poor lad's been stepped on. His back's broken. He must've crawled for hours to get back."

Arutha said, "I fail to see the significance of this."

Roland gripped the Prince's arm. "Arutha, he hunts them in the rat tunnels under the castle."

Comprehension dawned upon Arutha. He turned to Gardan and said,

"Sappers! The Tsurani must be digging under the east wall."

Gardan said, "That would explain the constant attacks upon the west wall-to draw us away."

Arutha said, "Gardan, take command of the walls. Amos, Roland, come with me."

Arutha ran down the steps and through the courtyard. He shouted for a group of soldiers to follow and bring shovels. They reached the small courtyard behind the keep, and Arutha said, "We've got to find that tunnel and collapse it."

Amos said, "Your walls are slanted outward at the plinth. They'll recognize they can't fire the timbers of the tunnels to bring it down to make a breach. They'll be trying to get a force inside the castle grounds or into the keep."

Roland looked alarmed. "Carline! She and the other ladies are in the cellars."

Arutha said, "Take some men and go to the cellars." Roland ran off. Arutha fell to his knees and placed his ear on the ground. The others followed his example, moving around, listening for sounds of digging from below.

CARLINE SAT NERVOUSLY next to the Lady Marna. The fat former governess made a show of calmly attending to her needlepoint despite the rustling and stirring of the other women in the cellar. The sounds of battle from the walls came to them as faint, distant echoes, muted by the thick walls of the keep. Now there was an equally unnerving quiet.

"Oh! To be sitting here like a caged bird," said Carline.

"The walls are no place for a lady," came the retort from Lady Marna. Carline stood. As she paced the room, she said, "I can tie bandages and carry water. All of us could."

The other ladies of the court looked at one another as if the Princess had been bereft of her senses. None of them could imagine subjecting herself to such a trial.

"Highness, please," said Lady Marna, "you should wait quietly. There will be much to do when the battle's over. Now you should rest."

Carline began a retort, then stopped. She held up her hand. "Do you hear something?"

The others stopped their movement, and all listened. From the floor came a faint tapping sound. Carline knelt upon the flagstone. "My lady, this is most unseemly," began the Lady Marna.

Carline stopped the complaint with an imperious wave of her hand.

. Quiet!" She placed her ear upon the flagstones. "There is something . . ."

lady Glynis shuddered. "Probably rats scurrying about. There are hundreds of them down here." Her expression showed this revelation was about as unpleasant a fact as imaginable.

"Be quiet!" ordered Carline.

There came a cracking sound from the floor and Carline leaped to her feet. Her sword came out of its scabbard as a fracture appeared in the stones of the floor. A chisel point broke through the flagstone, and suddenly the upturned stone was pushed up and outward.

ladies screamed as a hole appeared in the floor. A startled face popped into the light, then a Tsurani warrior, hair filthy from the dirt of the tunnel, tried to scramble upward. Carline's sword took him in the throat as she shouted, "Get out! Call the guards!"

Most of the women sat frozen in terror, refusing to move. Lady Marna heaved her massive bulk from the bench upon which she sat and gave a shrieking town girl a backhanded slap. The girl looked at lady Marna with wide-eyed fright for an instant, then broke toward the steps. As if at a signal, the others ran after, screaming for help.

Carline watched as the Tsurani slowly fell back, blocking the hole in the floor. Other cracks appeared around the hole, and hands pulled pieces of flagstone downward into the ever-widening entrance. Lady Marna was half-way to the steps when she saw Carline standing her ground. "Princess" she shrieked.

Another man came scrambling upward, and Carline delivered a death blow to him. She was then forced back as the stones near her feet collapsed. The Tsurani had terminated their tunnel in a wide hole and were now broadening the entrance, pulling down stones so that they could swarm out, overwhelming any defenders.

A man fought upward, pushing Carline to one side, allowing another to start his climb upward. Lady Marna ran back to her former ward and grabbed up a large piece of loose stone, which she brought crashing down on the unhelmeted skull of the second man. Grunts and strange-sounding words came from the tunnel mouth as the man fell back upon those behind.

Carline ran the other man through and kicked another in the face.

"Princess!" cried Lady Marna. "We must flee!"

Carline didn't answer. She dodged a blow at her feet delivered by a Tsurani who then sprang nimbly out of the hole. Carline thrust and the man dodged. Another came scrambling out of the hole, and the Lady Marna shrieked.

The first man turned reflexively at the sound, and Carline drove her sword into his side. The second man raised a serrated sword to strike Lady Marna, and Carline sprang for him, thrusting her sword point into his neck. The man shuddered and fell, his fingers releasing their grip on the sword. Carline grabbed Lady Marna's arm and propelled her toward the steps.

Tsurani came swarming out of the hole, and Carline turned at the bottom of the stairs. Lady Marna stood behind her beloved Princess, not willing to leave. The Tsurani approached warily. The girl had killed ' enough of their companions to warrant their respect and caution.

Suddenly a body crashed past the girl as Roland charged into the Tsurani, soldiers of the keep hurrying behind. The young Squire was in a frenzy to protect the Princess, and he bowled over three Tsurani in his rush. They tumbled backward, disappearing into the hole, Roland with them.

As the Squire vanished from view, Carline screamed, "Roland!"

Other guards leaped past the Princess to engage the Tsurani who still stood in the cellar, and more jumped boldly into the hole. Grunts and cries, shouts and oaths rang from the tunnel.

A guard took Carline by the arm and began to drag her up the stairs.

She followed, helpless in the man's strong grip, crying, "Roland!"

GRUNTs of EXERTION filled the dark tunnel as the soldiers from Crydee dug furiously. Arutha had found the Tsurani tunnel and had ordered a shaft sunk near it. They were now digging a countertunnel to intercept the Tsurani, near the wall. Amos had agreed with Arutha's judgment that they needed to force the Tsurani back beyond the wall before collapsing the tunnel denying them any access to the castle. A shovel broke through, and men began frantically clearing away enough dirt to allow passage into the Tsurani tunnel. Boards were hastily jammed into place, jerry-rigged supports, preventing the earth above from caving in on them.

The men from Crydee surged into the low tunnel and entered a frantic, terrible melee. Tsurani warriors and Roland's squad of soldiers were locked in a desperate hand-to-hand struggle in the dark. Men fought and died in the gloom under the earth. It was impossible to bring order to the fray, with the fighting in such confinement. An overturned lantern flickered faintly, providing little illumination.

Arutha said to a soldier behind, "Get more men!"

"At once, Highness!" answered the soldier, turning toward the shaft.

Arutha entered the Tsurani tunnel. It was only five feet high, so he moved stooped over. It was fairly wide, with enough room for three men to negotiate closely. Arutha stepped on something soft, which groaned in pain. He continued past the dying man, toward the sound of fighting. It was a scene from his worst nightmare, faintly lit by widely spaced torches. With little room only the first three men could engage the enemy at any one point. Arutha called out, "Knives!" and dropped his rapier. In close quarters the shorter weapons would prove more effective.

He came upon two men struggling in the darkness and grabbed at one. His hand closed on chitinous armor, and he plunged his knife into the man's exposed neck. Jerking the now lifeless body off the other man, he saw a jam of bodies a few feet away, where Crydee and Tsurani soldiers pressed against one another. Curses and cries filled the tunnel, and the damp earth smell was mixed with the odor of blood and excrement.

Arutha fought madly, blindly, lashing out at barely seen foes. His own fear kept threatening to overcome him as primitive awareness cried for him to quit the tunnel and the threatening earth above. He forced his panic down and continued to lead the attack on the sappers.

A familiar voice grunted and cursed at his side and Arutha knew Amos Trask was near. "Another thirty feet, lad!" he shouted.

Arutha took the man at his word, having lost all sense of distance.

The men of Crydee pressed onward, and many died killing the resisting Tsurani. Time became a blur and the fight a dim montage of images.

Abruptly Amos shouted, "Straw!" and bundles of dry straw were passed forward. "Torches!" he cried, and flaming torches were passed up. He piled the straw near a latticework of timbers and drove the torch into the pile. Flames burst upward, and he yelled, "Clear the tunnel!"

The fighting stopped. Every man, whether of Crydee or Tsurani, turned and fled the flames. The sappers knew the tunnel was lost without

means to quench the flames and scrambled for their lives. Choking smoke filled the tunnel and men began to cough as they cleared the cramped quarters. Arutha followed Amos, and they missed the turn to the countertunnel, coming out in the cellar. Guardsmen, dirty and bloody, were collapsing on the stones of the cellar, gasping for air. A dull rumble sounded, and with a crash, a blast of air and smoke blew out of the hole. Amos grinned, his face streaked with dirt. "The timbers collapsed. The tunnel's sealed."

Arutha nodded dumbly, exhausted and still reeling from the smoke. A cup of water was handed to him, and he drank deeply, soothing his burning throat.

Carline appeared before him. "Are you all right?" she asked, concern clear on her face. He nodded. She looked around. "Where's Roland?" Arutha shook his head. "It was impossible to see down there. Was he in the tunnel?"

She bit her lower lip. Tears welled up in her blue eyes as she nodded. Arutha said, "He might have cleared the tunnel and come up in the courtyard. Let us see."

He got to his feet, and Amos and Carline followed him up the stairs. They left the keep, and a soldier informed him the attack on the wall ~ had been repulsed. Arutha acknowledged the report and continued around the keep until they came to the shaft he had ordered dug. Soldiers lay on the grass of the yard, coughing and spitting, trying to clear their lungs of the burning smoke. The air hung heavy with an acrid haze as fumes from the fire continued to billow from the shaft. Another rumble sounded, and Arutha could feel it through the soles of his boots. Near the wall a depression had appeared where the tunnel had fallen below. "Squire Roland!" Arutha shouted.

"Here, Highness," came an answering shout from a soldier. Carline dashed past Arutha and reached Roland before the Prince. The Squire lay upon the ground, tended by the soldier who answered. His eyes were closed and his skin pale, and blood seeped from his side. The soldier said, "I had to drag him along the last few yards, Highness. He was out on his feet. I thought it might be smoke until I saw the wound."

Carline cradled Roland's head, while Arutha first cut the binding straps of Roland's breastplate, then tore away the undertunic. After a moment Arutha sat back upon his heels. "It's a shallow wound. He'll be all right."

"Oh, Roland," Carline said softly.

Roland's eyes opened and he grinned weakly. His voice was tired, but he forced a cheery note. "What's this? You'd think I'd been killed."

Carline said, "You heartless monster." She gently shook him but didn't release her hold as she smiled down at him. "Playing tricks at a time like this!"

He winced as he tried to move. "Ooh, that hurts." She placed a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't try to move. We must bind the wound," she said, caught between relief and anger.

Nestling his head into her lap, he smiled. "I'd not move for half your father's Duchy."



She looked at him in irritation. "What were you doing throwing yourself upon the enemy like that?"

Roland looked genuinely embarrassed. "In truth, I tripped coming down the steps and couldn't stop myself."

She placed her cheek against his forehead as Arutha and Amos laughed. "You are a liar. And I do love you," she said softly.

Arutha stood and took Amos in tow leaving Roland and Carline to each other. Reaching the corner, they encountered the former Tsurani slave, Charles, carrying water for the wounded. Arutha halted the man.

He stood with a yoke across his shoulders holding two large water buckets. He was bleeding from several small wounds and was covered with mire. Arutha said, "What happened to you?"

With a broad smile, Charles said, "Good fight. Jump in hole. Charles good warrior."

The former Tsurani slave was pale and weaved a little as he stood there. Arutha remained speechless, then indicated he should continue his work. Happily Charles hurried along. Arutha said to Amos, "What do you make of that?"

Amos chuckled. "I've had many dealings with rogues and scoundrels, Highness. I know little of these Tsurani, but I think that's a man to count on."

Arutha watched as Charles dispensed water to the other soldiers, ignoring his own wounds and fatigue. "That was no mean thing, jumping into the shaft without orders. I'll have to consider Longbow's offer to put that man in service."

They continued on their way, Arutha supervising the care of the wounded, while Amos was put in charge of the final destruction of the tunnel.

When dawn came, the courtyard was still, and only a patch of raw earth, where the shaft had been filled in, and a long depression running from the keep to the outer wall showed anything unusual had occurred in the night.

FANNON HOBbled ALONG the wall, favoring his right side. The wound to his back was almost healed, but he was still unable to walk without aid. Father Tully supported the Swordmaster as they came to where the others waited.

Arutha gave the Swordmaster a smile and gently took him by the other arm, helping Tully hold him. Gardan, Amos Trask, Martin Longbow, and a group of soldiers stood nearby.

"What's this?" asked Fannon, his display of gruff anger a welcome sight to those on the wall. "Have you so little wits among you that you must haul me from my rest to take charge?"

Arutha pointed out to sea. On the horizon dozens of small flecks could be seen against the blue of sea and sky, flashes of brilliant white glinting as the morning sun was caught and reflected back to them.

"The fleet from Carse and Tulan approaches the south beaches."

He indicated the Tsurani camp in the distance, bustling with activity.

"Today we'll drive them out. By this time tomorrow we'll clear this entire area of the aliens. We'll harry them eastward, allowing them no

respite. It will be a long time before they'll come in strength again." ~ quietly Fannon said, "I trust you are right, Arutha." He stood without speaking for a time, then said, "I have heard reports of your command, Arutha. You've done well. You are a credit to your father, and to Crydee."

Finding himself moved by the Swordmaster's praise, Arutha tried to make light, but Fannon interrupted. "No, you have done all that was needed, and more. You were right. With these people we must not be cautious. We must carry the struggle to them." He sighed. "I am an old man, Arutha. It is time I retired and left warfare to the young."

Tully made a derisive noise. "You're not old. I was already a priest when you were still in swaddling."

Fannon laughed with the others at the obvious untruth of the statement, and Arutha said, "You must know, if I've done well, it is because of your teachings."

Tully gripped Fannon's elbow. "You may not be an old man, but you are a sick one. Back to the keep with you. You've had enough gadding about. You can begin walking regularly tomorrow. In a few weeks you'll be charging about, shouting orders at everyone like your old self."

Fannon managed a slight smile and allowed Tully to lead him back down the stairs. When he was gone, Gardan said, "The Swordmaster's right, Highness. You've done your father proud."

Arutha watched the approaching ships, his angular features fixed in an expression of quiet reflection. Softly he said, "If I have done well, it is because I have had the aid of good men, many no longer with us." He took a deep breath, then continued, "You have played a great part in our withstanding this siege, Gardan, and you, Martin."

Both men smiled and voiced their thanks. "And you, pirate." Arutha grinned. "You've also played a great part. We are deeply in your debt." Amos Trask tried to look modest and failed. "Well, Highness, I was merely protecting my own skin as well as everyone else's." He then returned Arutha's grin. "It was a rousing good fight."

Arutha looked toward the sea once more. "Let us hope we can soon be done with rousing good fights." He left the walls and started down the stairs. "Give orders to prepare for the attack."

CARLINE sTOOD ATOP the south tower of the keep, her arm around Roland's waist. The Squire was pale from his wound, but otherwise in hale spirits. "We'll be done with the siege, now the fleet's arrived," he said, clinging tightly to the Princess.

"It has been a nightmare."

He smiled down at her, gazing into her blue eyes. "Not entirely. There has been some compensation."

Softly she said, "You are a rogue," then kissed him. When they separated, she said, "I wonder if your foolish bravery was nothing more than a ploy to gain my sympathies."

Feigning a wince, he said, "Lady, I am wounded."

She clung to him. "I was so worried about you, not knowing if you lay dead in the tunnel. I . . ." Her voice dropped off as her gaze strayed to the north tower of the keep, opposite the one upon which they stood. She could see the window upon the second floor, the window to Pug's

room. The funny little metal chimney, which would constantly belch smoke when he was at his studies, was now only a mute reminder of just how empty the tower stood.

Roland followed her gaze. "I know," he said. "I miss him, too. And Tomas as well."

She sighed. "That seems such a long time ago, Roland. I was a girl then, a girl with a girl's notion of what life and love were about." Softly she said, "Some love comes like a wind off the sea, while others grow slowly from the seeds of friendship and kindness. Someone once told me that."

"Father Tully. He was right." He squeezed her waist. "Either way, as long as you feel, you live."

She watched as the soldiers of the garrison prepared for the coming sortie. "Will this end it?"

"No, they will come again. This war is fated to last a long time."

They stood together, taking comfort in the simple fact of each other's existence.

KASUMI OF THE Shinzawai, Force Leader of the Armies of the Kanazawai Clan, of the Blue Wheel Party, watched the enemy upon the castle wall. He could barely make out the figures walking along the battlements, but he knew them well. He could not put names to any, but they were each as familiar to him as his own men. The slender youth who commanded, who fought like a demon, who brought order to the fray when needed, he was there. The black giant would not be too far from his side the one who stood like a bulwark against every attack upon the walls. And the green-clad one, who could race through the woods like an apparition, taunting KASUMI's men by the freedom with which he passed their lines, he would be there as well. No doubt the broadshouldered one was nearby, the laughing man with the curved sword and maniacal grin. KASUMI quietly saluted them all as valiant foemen, even if only barbarians. '

Chingari of the Omechkel, the Senior Strike Leader, came to stand at Kasumi's side. "Force Leader, the barbarian fleet is nearing. They will land their men within the hour."

Kasumi regarded the scroll he held in his hand. It had been read a dozen times since arriving at dawn. He glanced at it one more time, again studying the chop at the bottom, the crest of his father, Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai. Silently accepting his personal fate, Kasumi said, "Order for march. Break camp at once and begin assembling the warriors. We are commanded to return to Kelewan. Send the trailbreakers ahead."

Chingari's voice betrayed his bitterness. "Now the tunnel is destroyed, do we quit so meekly?"

"There is no shame, Chingari. Our clan has withdrawn itself from the Alliance for War, as have the other clans of the Blue Wheel Party. The War Party is once more alone in the conduct of this invasion."

With a sigh Chingari said, "Again politics interferes with conquest. It would have been a glorious victory to take such a fine castle."

Kasumi laughed. "True." He watched the activities of the castle.

"They are the best we have ever faced. We already learn much from

them. Castle walls slanted outward at the plinth, preventing sappers from collapsing them, this is a new and clever thing. And those beasts they ride. Ayee, how they move, like Thun racing across the tundras of home. I will somehow gain some of those animals. Yes, these people are more than simple barbarians."

After a moment's more reflection, he said, "Have our scouts and trailbreakers keep alert for signs of the forest devils."

Chingari spat. "The foul ones move in great number northward once more. They're as much a dagger in our side as the barbarians."

Kasumi said, "When this world is conquered, we shall have to see to these creatures. The barbarians make strong slaves. Some may even prove valuable enough to make free vassals who will swear loyalty to our houses, but those foul ones, they must be obliterated." Kasumi fell silent for a while. Then he said, "Let the barbarians think we flee in terror from their fleet. This place is now a matter for the clans remaining in the War Party. Let Tasio of the Minwanabi worry about a garrison at his rear should he move eastward. Until the Kanazawai once more realign themselves in the High Council, we are done with this war. Order the march."

Chingari saluted his commander and left, and Kasumi considered the implications of the message from his father. He knew the withdrawal of all the forces of the Blue Wheel Party would prove a major setback for the Warlord and his party. The repercussions of such a move would be felt throughout the Empire for some years to come. There would be no smashing victories for the Warlord now, for with the departure of those forces loyal to the Kanazawai lords and the other clans of the Blue Wheel, other clans would reconsider before joining in an all-out push. No, thought Kasumi, it was a bold but dangerous move by his father and the other lords. This war would now be prolonged. The Warlord was robbed of a spectacular conquest; he was now overextended with too few men holding too much land. Without new allies he would remain unable to press forward with the war. His choices were now down to two: withdraw from Midkemia and risk humiliation before the High Council, or sit and wait, hoping for another shift in politics at home. It was a stunning move on behalf of the Blue Wheel. But the risk was great. And the risk from the next series of moves in the Game of the Council would be even more dangerous. Silently he said: O my father, we are now firmly committed to the Great Game. We risk much: our family, our clan, our honor, and perhaps even the Empire itself. Crumbling the scroll, he tossed it into a nearby brazier, and when it was totally consumed by flame, he put aside thoughts of risk and walked back toward his tent.

BOOK II

19

SLAVE

THE DYING SLAVE LAY SCREAMING.

The day was unmercifully hot. The other slaves went about their work, ignoring the sound as much as possible. Life in the work camp

was cheap, and it did no good to dwell on the fate that awaited so many. The dying man had been bitten by a relli, a snakelike swamp creature. Its venom was slow-acting and painful; short of magic, there was no cure.

Suddenly there was silence. Pug looked over to see a Tsurani guard wipe off his sword. A hand fell on Pug's shoulder. Laurie's voice whispered in his ear, "Looks like our venerable overseer was disturbed by the sound of Toffston's dying."

Pug tied a coil of rope securely around his waist. "At least it ended quickly." He turned to the tall blond singer from the Kingdom city of Tyr-Sog and said, "Keep a sharp eye out. This one's old and may be rotten." Without another word Pug scampered up the bole of the ngaggi tree, a firlike swamp tree the Tsurani harvested for wood and resins. With few metals, the Tsurani had become clever in finding substitutes.

The wood of this tree could be worked like paper, then dried to an incredible hardness, useful in fashioning a hundred things. The resins were used to laminate woods and cure hides. Properly cured hides could produce a suit of leather armor as tough as Midkemian chain mail, and laminated wooden weapons were nearly the match of Midkemian steel.

Four years in the swamp camp had hardened Pug's body. His sinuey muscles strained as he climbed the tree. His skin had been tann deeply by the harsh sun of the Tsurani homeworld. His face was covered " by a slave's beard.

Pug reached the first large branches and looked down at his friend. Laurie stood knee-deep in the murky water, absently swatting at the insects that plagued them while they worked. Pug liked Laurie. The troubadour had no business being here, but then he'd had no business tagging along with a patrol in the hope of seeing Tsurani soldiers, either. He said he had wanted material for ballads that would make him famous throughout the Kingdom. He had seen more than he had hoped for. The patrol had ridden into a major Tsurani offensive, and Laurie ' - ' had been captured. He had come to this camp over four months ago, ' and he and Pug had quickly become friends.

Pug continued his climb, keeping one eye always searching for the dangerous tree dwellers of Kelewan. Reaching the most likely place for a topping, Pug froze as he caught a glimpse of movement. He relaxed when he saw it was only a needler, a creature whose protection was its resemblance to a clump of ngaggi needles. It scurried away from the presence of the human and made the short jump to the branch of a neighboring tree. Pug made another survey and started tying his rope. His job was to cut away the tops of the huge trees, making the fall less dangerous to those below.

Pug took several cuts at the bark, then felt the edge of his wooden knife bite into the softer pulp beneath. A faint pungent odor greeted his careful sniffing. Swearing, he called down to Laurie, "This one's rotten." Tell the overseer."

He waited, looking out over the tops of trees. All around, strange insects and birdlike creatures flew. In the four years he had been a slave I on this world, he had not grown used to the appearance of these life '

forms. They were not all that different from those on Midkemia, but it was the similarities as much as the differences that kept reminding him that"

this was not his home. Bees should be yellow-and-black-striped, not bright red. Eagles shouldn't have yellow bands on their wings, nor hawks purple.

These creatures were not bees, eagles, or hawks, but the resemblance was striking. Pug found it easier to accept the stranger creatures of Kelewan than these. The six-legged needra, the domesticated beast of burden that looked like some sort of bovine with two extra stumpy legs, or the cho-ja, the insectoid creature who served the Tsurani and could speak their language: these he had come to find familiar. But each time he glimpsed a creature from the corner of his eye and turned, expecting it to be Midkemian only to find it was not, then the despair would strike.

Laurie's voice brought him from his reverie. "The overseer comes."

Pug swore. If the overseer had to get himself dirty by wading in the water, then he would be in a foul mood-which could mean beatings, or a reduction in the chronically meager food. He would already be angered by the delay in the cutting. A family of burrowers-beaverlike six-legged creatures-had made themselves at home in the roots of the great trees. They would gnaw the tender roots and the trees would sicken and die. The soft, pulpy wood would turn sour, then watery, and after a while the tree would collapse from within. Several burrower tunnels had been poisoned, but the damage had already been done to the trees.

A rough voice, swearing mightily while its owner splashed through the swamp, announced the arrival of the overseer, Nogamu. He himself was a slave, but he had attained the highest rank a slave could rise to, and while he could never hope to be free, he had many privileges and could order soldiers or freemen placed under his command. A young soldier came walking behind, a look of mild amusement on his face. He was clean-shaven in the manner of a Tsurani freeman, and as he looked up at Pug, the slave could get a good look at him. He had the high cheekbones and nearly black eyes that so many Tsurani possessed. His dark eyes caught sight of Pug, and he seemed to nod slightly. His blue armor was of a type unknown to Pug, but with the strange Tsurani military organization, that was not surprising. Every family, demesne, area, town, city, and province appeared to have its own army. How they all related one to another within the Empire was beyond Pug's understanding.

The overseer stood at the base of the tree, his short robe held above the water. He growled like the bear he resembled and shouted up at Pug, "What's this about another rotten tree?"

Pug spoke the Tsurani language better than any Midkemian in the camp, for he had been there longer than all but a few old Tsurani slaves. He shouted down, "It smells of rot. We should rerig another and leave this one alone, Slave Master."

The overseer shook his fist. "You are all lazy. There is nothing wrong with this tree. It is fine. You only want to keep from working. Now cut ~ it!"

Pug sighed. There was no arguing with the Bear, as all the Midkemian slaves called Nogamu. He was obviously upset about something, and the slaves would pay the price. Pug started hacking through the upper section, and it soon fell to the ground. The smell of rot was thick, and Pug removed the ropes quickly. Just as the last length was coiled around his waist, a splitting sound came from directly in front of him. "It falls!" he shouted down to the slaves standing in the water below. Without hesitation they all ran. The cry of "falls" was never ignored. The bole of the tree was splitting down the middle now that the top had been cut away. While this was not common, if a tree was far enough gone for the pulp to have lost its strength, any flaw in the bark could cause it to split under its own weight. The tree's branches would pull the halves away from each other. Had Pug been tied to the bole, the ropes would have cut him in half before they snapped. Pug gauged the direction of the fall, then as the half he stood upon started to move he launched himself away from it. He hit the water flat, back first, trying to let the two feet of water break his fall as much as possible. The blow from the water was immediately followed by the harder impact with the ground. The bottom was mostly mud, so there was little damage done. The air in his lungs exploded from his mouth when he struck, and his senses reeled for a moment. He retained enough presence of mind to sit up and gasp a deep lungful of air. Suddenly a heavy weight hit him across the stomach, knocking the wind from him and pushing his head back underwater. He struggled to move and found a large branch across his stomach. He could barely get his face out of the water to get air. His lungs burned, and he breathed without control. Water came pouring down his windpipe, and he started to choke. Coughing and sputtering, he tried to keep calm but felt panic rise within him. He frantically pushed at the weight across him but couldn't move it. Abruptly he found his head above water, Laurie said, "Spit, Pug! Get the muck out of your lungs, or you'll get lung fever." Pug coughed and spit. With Laurie holding his head, he could catch his breath. Laurie shouted, "Grab this branch. I'll pull him out from under." Several slaves splashed over, sweat beading their bodies. They reached underwater and seized the branch. Heaving, they managed to move it slightly, but Laurie couldn't drag Pug out. "Bring axes; we'll have to cut the branch from the tree." Other slaves were starting to bring axes over when Nogamu shouted, "No. Leave him. We have no time for this. There are trees to cut." Laurie nearly screamed at him, "We can't leave him! He'll drown!" The overseer crossed over and struck Laurie across the face with a lash. It cut deep into the singer's cheek, but he didn't let go of his friend's head. "Back to work, slave. You'll be beaten tonight for speaking to me that way. There are others who can top. Now, let him go!" He struck Laurie again. Laurie winced, but held Pug's head above water. Nogamu raised his lash for a third blow, but was halted by a voice from behind. "Cut the slave from under the branch." Laurie saw the speaker was the young soldier who had accompanied the slave master. The overseer whirled about, unaccustomed to having his orders questioned.

When he saw who had spoken, he bit back the words that were on his lips. Bowing his head, he said, "My lord's will."

He signaled for the slaves with the axes to cut Pug loose, and in short order Pug was out from under the branch. Laurie carried him over to where the young soldier stood. Pug coughed the last water from his lungs and gasped, "I thank the master for my life."

The man said nothing, but when the overseer approached, directed his remarks to him. "The slave was right, and you were not. The tree was rotten. It is not proper for you to punish him for your bad judgment and ill temper. I should have you beaten, but will not spare the time for it. The work goes slowly, and my father is displeased."

Nogamu bowed his head. "I lose much face in my lord's sight. May I have his permission to kill myself?"

"No. It is too much honor. Return to work."

The overseer's face grew red in silent shame and rage. Raising his lash, he pointed at Laurie and Pug. "You two, back to work."

Laurie stood, and Pug tried. His knees were wobbly from his near drowning, but he managed to stand after a few attempts.

"These two shall be excused work the rest of the day," the young lord said. "This one"-he pointed to Pug-"is of little use. The other must dress those cuts you gave him, or festering will start." He turned to a guard. "Take them back to camp and see to their needs."

Pug was grateful, not so much for himself as for Laurie. With a little rest, Pug could have returned to work, but an open wound in the swamp was a death warrant as often as not. Infections came quickly in this hot, dirty place, and there were few ways of dealing with them.

They followed the guard. As they left, Pug could see the slave master watching them with naked hatred in his eyes.

ThERE WAS A creaking of floorboards, and Pug came instantly awake. His slave-bred wariness told him that the sound didn't belong in the hut ~ during the dead of night.

Through the gloom, footfalls could be heard coming closer, then they stopped at the foot of his pallet. From the next pallet, he could hear Laurie's sharp intake of breath, and he knew the minstrel was awake also. Probably half the slaves had been awakened by the intruder. The stranger hesitated over something, and Pug waited, tense with uncertainty.

There was a grunt, and without hesitation Pug rolled off his mat.

A weight came crashing down, and Pug could hear a dull thud as a dagger struck where his chest had been only moments before. Suddenly the room exploded with activity. Slaves were shouting and could be heard running for the door.

Pug felt hands reach for him in the dark, and a sharp pain exploded across his chest. He reached blindly for his assailant and grappled with him for the blade. Another slash, and his right hand was cut across the palm. Abruptly the attacker stopped moving, and Pug became aware that a third body was atop the would-be assassin.

Soldiers rushed into the hut, carrying lanterns, and Pug could see Laurie lying across the still body of Nogamu. The Bear was still breathing, but from the way the dagger protruded from his ribs, not for long. The young soldier who had saved Pug's and Laurie's lives entered,



and the others made way for him. He stood over the three combatants and simply asked, "Is he dead?"

The overseer's eyes opened, and in a faint whisper he said, "I live, lord. But I die by the blade." A weak but defiant smile showed on his sweat-drenched face.

The young soldier's expression betrayed no emotion, but his eyes looked as if ablaze. "I think not," he said softly. He turned to two of the soldiers in the room. "Take him outside at once and hang him. There will be no honors for his clan to sing. Leave the body there for the insects. It shall be a warning that I am not to be disobeyed. Go."

The dying man's face paled, and his lips quivered. "No, master. I pray, leave me to die by the blade. A few minutes longer." Bloody foam appeared at the corner of his mouth.

Two husky soldiers reached down for Nogamu and, with little thought for his pain, dragged him outside. He could be heard wailing the entire way. The amount of strength left in his voice was amazing, as if his fear of the rope had awakened some deep reserve.

They stood in frozen tableau until the sound was cut off in a strangled cry. The young officer then turned to Pug and Laurie. Pug sat, blood running from a long, shallow gash across his chest. He held his injured hand in the other. It was deeply cut, and his fingers wouldn't move.

"Bring your wounded friend," the young soldier commanded Laurie. Laurie helped Pug to his feet, and they followed the officer out of the slave hut. He led them across the compound to his own quarters and ordered them to enter. Once inside, he instructed a guard to send for the camp physician. He had them stand in silence until the physician arrived. He was an old Tsurani, dressed in the robes of one of their gods which one the Midkemians couldn't tell. He inspected Pug's wounds and judged the chest wound superficial. The hand, he said, would be another matter.

"The cut is deep, and the muscles and tendons have been cut. It will heal, but there will be a loss of movement and little strength for gripping. He most likely will be fit for only light duty."

The soldier nodded, a peculiar expression on his face: a mixture of disgust and impatience. "Very well. Dress the wounds and leave US.,

The physician set about cleaning the wounds. He took a score of stitches in the hand, bandaged it, admonished Pug to keep it clean, and left. Pug ignored the pain, easing his mind with an old mental exercise. After the physician was gone, the soldier studied the two slaves before him. "By law, I should have you hanged for killing the slave master." They said nothing. They would remain silent until commanded to speak.

"But as I hanged the slave master, I am free to keep you alive, should it suit my purpose. I can simply have you punished for wounding him." He paused. "Consider yourselves punished."

With a wave of his hand he said, "Leave me, but return here at daybreak. I have to decide what to do with you."

They left, feeling fortunate, for under most circumstances they would now be hanging next to the former slave master. As they crossed the

compound, Laurie said, "I wonder what that was about."

Pug responded, "I hurt too much to wonder why. I'm just thankful that we will see tomorrow."

Laurie said nothing until they reached the slave hut. "I think the young lord has something up his sleeve."

"Whatever. I have long since given up trying to understand our masters.

That's why I've stayed alive so long, Laurie. I just do what I'm told to, and I endure." Pug pointed to the tree where the former overseer's body could be seen in the pale moonlight~only the small moon was out tonight. "It's much too easy to end up like that."

Laurie nodded. "Perhaps you're right. I still think about escape."

Pug laughed, a short, bitter sound. "where, singer? Where could you run? Toward the rift and ten thousand Tsurani?"

Laurie said nothing. They returned to their pallets and tried to sleep in the humid heat.

THE YOUNG OFFICER sat upon a pile of cushions, cross-legged in Tsurani fashion. He sent away the guard who had accompanied Pug and Laurie, then motioned for the two slaves to sit. They did so hesitantly, for a slave was not usually permitted to sit in a master's presence.

"I am Hokanu, of the Shinzawai. My father owns this camp," he said without preamble. "He is deeply dissatisfied with the harvest this year. He has sent me to see what can be done. Now I have no overseer to manage the work, because a foolish man blamed you for his own stupidity. What am I to do?"

They said nothing. He asked, "You have been here, how long?"

'Four years, Master.'

'One year, master.'

Pug and Laurie answered in turn. He considered the answers, then said, "You"-pointing at Laurie-"are nothing unusual, save you speak our tongue better than most barbarians, all things considered. But you" pointing at Pug-"have stayed alive longer than most of your stiff-necked countrymen and also speak our language well. You might even pass for a peasant from a remote province."

They sat still, unsure of what Hokanu was leading up to. Pug realized with a shock that he was probably older by a year or two than this young lord. He was young for such power. The ways of the Tsurani were very strange. In Crydee he would still be an apprentice, or if noble, continuing his education in statecraft.

"How do you speak so well?" he asked of Pug.

"Master, I was among the first captured and brought here. There were only seven of us among so many Tsurani slaves. We learned to survive. After some time, I was the only one left. The others died of the burning fever or festering wounds, or were killed by the guards. There were none for me to talk with who spoke my own language. No other countryman came to this camp for over a year."

The officer nodded, then to Laurie said, "And you?"

"Master, I am a singer, a minstrel in my own land. It is our custom to travel broadly, and we must learn many tongues. I have also a good ear for music. Your language is what is called a tone language on my world; words with the same sound save for the pitch with which they are spoken have different meanings. We have several such tongues to the

south of our Kingdom. I learn quickly."

A glimmering appeared in the eyes of the soldier. "It is good to know these things." He lapsed deep into thought. After a moment he nodded to himself. "There are many considerations that fashion a man's fortune, slaves." He smiled, looking more like a boy than a man. "This camp is a shambles. I am to prepare a report for my father, the Lord of the Shinzawai. I think I know what the problems are." He pointed at Pug. "I would have your thoughts on the subject. You have been here longer than anyone."

Pug composed himself. It had been a long time since anyone had asked him to venture an opinion on anything. "Master, the first overseer, the one who was here when I was captured, was a shrewd man, who understood that men, even slaves, cannot be made to work well if they are weak from hunger. We had better food and if injured were given time for healing. Nogamu was an ill-tempered man who took every setback as a personal affront. Should burrowers ruin a grove, it was the fault of the slaves. Should a slave die, it was a plot to discredit his oversight of the work force. Each difficulty was rewarded by another cut in food, or in longer work hours. Any good fortune was regarded as his rightful due."

"I suspected as much. Nogamu was at one time a very important man. He was the hadonra-demesne manager-of his father's estates. His family was found to be guilty of plotting against the Empire, and his own clan sold them all into slavery, those that were not hanged. He was never a good slave. It was thought that giving him responsibility for the camp might find some useful channel for his skills. It proved not to be the case.

"Is there a good man among the slaves who could command ably?"

Laurie inclined his head, then said, "Master, Pug here . . ."

"I think not. I have plans for you both."

Pug was surprised and wondered what he meant. He said, "Perhaps Chogana, master. He was a farmer, until his crops failed and he was sold into slavery for taxes. He has a level head."

The soldier clapped his hands once, and a guard was in the room in an instant. "Send for the slave Chogana."

The guard saluted and left. "It is good that he is Tsurani," said the soldier. "You barbarians do not know your place, and I hate to think what would happen should I leave one in charge. He would have my soldiers cutting the trees while the slaves stood guard."

There was a moment of silence, then Laurie laughed. It was a rich, deep sound. Hokanu smiled. Pug watched closely. The young man who had their lives in his hands seemed to be working hard at winning their trust. Laurie appeared to have taken a liking to him, but Pug held his feelings in check. He was further removed from the old Midkemian society, where war made noble and commoner comrades-in-arms, able to share meals and misery without regard for rank. One thing he had learned about the Tsurani early on was that they never for an instant forgot their station. Whatever was occurring in this hut was by this young soldier's design, not by chance. Hokanu seemed to feel Pug's eyes upon him and looked at him. Their eyes locked briefly before Pug dropped his as a slave is expected to do. For an instant a communication

passed between them. It was as if the soldier had said: You do not believe that I am a friend. So be it, as long as you act your part. With a wave of his hand, Hokanu said, "Return to your hut. Rest well, for we will leave after the noon meal."

They rose and bowed, then backed out of the hut. Pug walked in silence, but Laurie said, "I wonder where we are going." When no answer came, he added, "In any event, it will have to be a better place than this."

Pug wondered if it would be.

A HAND SHOOK Pug's shoulder, and he came awake. He had been dozing in the morning heat, taking advantage of the extra rest before he and Laurie left with the young noble after the noon meal. Chogana, the former farmer Pug had recommended, motioned for silence, pointing to where Laurie slept deeply.

Pug followed the old slave out of the hut, to sit in the shade of the building. Speaking slowly, as was his fashion, Chogana said, "My lord Hokanu tells me you were instrumental in my being selected slave master for the camp." His brown seamed face looked dignified as he bowed his head toward Pug. "I am in your debt."

Pug returned the bow, formal and unusual in this camp. "There is no debt. You will conduct yourself as an overseer should. You will care well for our brothers."

Chogana's old face split in a grin, revealing teeth stained brown by years of chewing tateen nuts. The mildly narcotic nut~easily found in the swamp did not reduce efficiency but made the work seem less harsh. Pug had avoided the habit, for no reasons he could voice, as had most of the Midkemians. It seemed somehow to signify a final surrender of will.

Chogana stared at the camp, his eyes narrowed to slits by the harsh light. It stood empty, except for the young lord's bodyguard and the cook's crew. In the distance the sounds of the work crew echoed through the trees.

"When I was a boy, on my father's farm in Szetac," began Chogana, "it was discovered I had a talent. I was investigated and found lacking." The meaning of that last statement was lost on Pug, but he didn't interrupt. "So I became a farmer like my father. But my talent was there. Sometimes I see things, Pug, things within men. As I grew, word of my talent spread, and people mostly poor people, would come and ask for my advice. As a young man I was arrogant and charged much, telling of what I saw. when I was older, I was humble and took whatever was offered, but still I told what I saw. Either way, people left angry. Do you know why?" he asked with a chuckle. Pug shook his head. "Because they didn't come to hear the truth they came to hear what they wanted to hear."

Pug shared Chogana's laugh. "So I pretended the talent went away, and after a time people stopped coming to my farm. But the talent never went away, Pug, and I still can see things sometimes. I have seen something in you, and I would tell you before you leave forever. I will die in this camp, but you have a different fate before you. Will you listen?" Pug said he would, and Chogana said, "Within you there is a

trapped power. what it is and what it means, I do not know."

Knowing the strange Tsurani attitude toward magicians, Pug felt sudden panic at the possibility someone might have sensed his former calling. To most he was just another slave in the camp, and to a few, a former squire.

Chogana continued, speaking with his eyes closed. "I dreamed about you, Pug. I saw you upon a tower, and you faced a fearsome foe." He opened his eyes. "I do not know what the dream may mean, but this you must know. Before you mount that tower to face your foe, you must seek your wai; it is that secret center of your being, the perfect place of peace within. Once you reside there, you are safe from all harm. Your flesh may suffer, even die, but within your wal you will endure in peace. Seek hard, Pug, for few men find their wal. "

Chogana stood. "You will leave soon. Come, we must wake Laurie." As they walked to the hut entrance, Pug said, "Chogana, thank you. But one thing: you spoke of a foe upon the tower. Could you mark him?"

Chogana laughed and bobbed his head up and down. "Oh yes, I saw him." He continued to chuckle as he climbed the steps to the hut. "He is the foe to be feared most by any man." Narrow eyes regarded Pug. "He was you."

Pug AND Laurie sat on the steps of the temple, with six Tsurani guards ~ lounging around. The guards had been civil-barely-for the entire journey. The travel had been tiring, if not difficult. With no horses, nor anything to substitute for them, every Tsurani not riding in a needra cart moved by power of shanks' mare, their own or others. Nobles were carried up and down the wide boulevards on litters borne on the backs of puffing, sweating slaves.

Pug and Laurie had been given the short, plain grey robes of slaves. Their loincloths, adequate in the swamps, were deemed unsightly for travel among Tsurani citizens. The Tsurani' put some store upon modesty -if not as much as -people in the Kingdom did.

They had come up the road along the coast of the great body of water called Battle Bay. Pug had thought that if it was a bay, it was larger than anything so named in Midkemia, for even from the high cliffs overlooking it, the other side could not be seen. After several days' travel they had entered cultivated pastureland and soon after could see the opposite shore closing in rapidly. Another few days on the road, and they had come to the city of Jamar.

Pug and Laurie watched the passing traffic, while Hokanu made an offering at the temple. The Tsurani seemed mad for colors. Here even the lowliest worker was likely to be dressed in a brightly colored short robe. Those with wealth could be seen in more flamboyant dress, covered with intricately executed designs. Only slaves lacked colorful dress.

Everywhere around the city, people thronged: farmers, traders, workers, and travelers. Lines of needras plodded by, pulling wagons

filled with produce and goods. The sheer numbers of people overwhelmed Pug and Laurie, for the Tsurani seemed like ants scurrying about as if the commerce of the Empire could not wait upon the comfort of its citizens. Many who passed stopped to stare at the Midkemians, whom they regarded as giant barbarians. Their own height topped out at about five feet six inches, and even Pug was considered tall, having come- to his full growth at five feet eight. for their part, the Midkemians had come to refer to the Tsurani as runts.

Pug and Laurie looked about. They waited in the center of the city, where the great temples were. Ten pyramids sat amid a series of parks differing in size. All were richly appointed with murals, both tiled and painted. From where they were, the young men could see three of the parks. Each was terraced, with miniature watercourses winding through, complete with tiny waterfalls. Dwarf trees, as well as large shade trees, dotted the grass-covered grounds of the parks. Strolling musicians played flutes and strange stringed instruments, producing alien, polytonal music, entertaining those who rested in the parks or passed by.

Laurie listened with rapt attention. "Listen to those halftones! And those diminished minors!" He sighed and looked down at the ground, his manner somber. "It's alien, but it's music." He looked at Pug, and the usual humor was missing from his voice. "If I could only play again." He glanced at the distant musicians. "I could even develop a taste for Tsurani music." Pug left him alone with his longings.

Pug glanced around the busy city square, attempting to sort out the impressions that had been coming without cease since entering the outer precinct of the city. Everywhere people hurried about their business. A short distance from the temples, they had passed through a market, not unlike those in Kingdom cities, but larger. The noise of hawkers and buyers, the smells, the heat, all reminded him of home in an odd way.

When Hokanu's party neared, commoners would step out of the way, for the guards at the head of the procession would call out "Shinzawai!

Shinzawai!" letting everyone know a noble approached. Only once did the party give way in the city; a group of red-clad men, robed in cloaks of scarlet feathers. The one that Pug took to be a high priest wore a mask of wood fashioned to resemble a red skull, while the others had red painted faces. They blew reed whistles, and people scattered to clear their line of march. One of the soldiers made a sign of protection, and later Pug learned these men were the priests of Turakamu, the eater of hearts, brother to the goddess Sibi, she who was death.

Pug turned to a nearby guard and motioned for permission to speak.

The guard nodded once, and Pug said, "Master, what god resides here?"

as he pointed to the temple where Hokanu prayed.

"Ignorant barbarian," answered the soldier in a friendly manner, "the gods do not abide in these halls, but in the Upper and Lower Heavens.

This temple is for men to make their devotions. Here my lord's son makes an offering and petitions to Chochocan, the good god of the Upper Heaven and his servant, Tomachaca, the god of peace, for good fortune for the Shinzawai."

when Hokanu returned, they started off again. They made their way through the city, Pug still studying the people they passed. The press was incredible, and Pug wondered how they managed to stand it. Like farmers in a city for the first time, Pug and Laurie kept gawking at the wonders of Jamar. Even the supposedly worldly troubadour would exclaim about this sight or that. Soon the guards were chuckling over the barbarians' obvious delight at the most mundane things.

Every building they passed was fashioned from wood and a translucent material, clothlike but rigid. A few, like the temples, were constructed with stone, but what was most remarkable was that every building they passed, from temple to worker's hut, was painted white, except for bordering beams and door frames, which were polished deep brown. Every open surface was decorated with colorful paintings. animals, landscapes, deities, and battle scenes abounded. Everywhere was a riot of color to confound the eye.

To the north of the temples, across from one of the parks and facing a wide boulevard, stood a single building, set apart by open lawns bordered with hedges. Two guards, dressed in armor and helm similar to those of their own guards, stood watch at the door. They saluted Hokanu when he approached.

Without a word their other guards marched around the side of the house, leaving the slaves with the young officer. He signaled, and one of the door guards slid the large cloth-covered door aside. They entered an open hallway leading back, with doors on each side. Hokanu marched them to a rear door, which a house slave opened for them.

Pug and Laurie then discovered the house was fashioned like a square, with a large garden in the center, accessible from all sides. Near a bubbling pool sat an older man, dressed in a plain but rich-looking dark blue robe. He was consulting a scroll. He looked up when the three entered, and rose to greet Hokanu.

The young man removed his helm and then came to attention. Pug and Laurie stood slightly behind and said nothing. The man nodded, and

Hokanu approached. They embraced, and the older man said, "My son, it is good to see you again. How were things at the camp?"

Hokanu made his report on the camp, briefly and to the point, leaving out nothing of importance. He then told of the actions taken to remedy the situation. "So the new overseer will see that the slaves have ample food and rest. He should increase production soon."

His father nodded.. "I think you have acted wisely, my son. We shall have to send another in a few months' time to gauge progress, but things could not become any worse than they were. The Warlord demands higher production, and we border on falling into his bad graces."

He seemed to notice the slaves for the first time. "These?" was all he said, pointing at Laurie and Pug.

"They are unusual. I was thinking of our talk on the night before my brother went to the north. They may prove valuable."

"Have you spoken of this to anyone?" Firm lines set around his grey eyes. Even though much shorter, he somehow reminded Pug of Lord Borric.

"No, my father. Only those who took council that night-" The lord of the house cut him off with a wave of the hand. "Save your remarks for later. 'Trust no secrets to a city.' Inform Septiem. We close the house and leave for our estates in the morning."

Hokanu bowed slightly, then turned to leave. "Hokanu." His father's voice stopped him. "You have done well." Pride plainly showing on his face, the young man left the garden.

The lord of the house sat again upon a bench of carved stone, next to a small fountain, and regarded the two slaves. "what are you called?"

"Pug, master."

"Laurie, master." .

He seemed to derive some sort of insight from these simple statements. "Through that door," he said, pointing to the left, "is the way to the cookhouse. My hadonra is called Septiem. He will see to your care.

Go now."



They bowed and left the garden. As they made their way through the house, Pug nearly knocked over a young girl coming around a corner.

She was dressed in a slave's robe and carried a large bundle of washing.

It went flying across the hall.

"Oh!" she cried. "I've just now washed these. Now I'll have to do them over." Pug quickly bent to help her pick them up. She was tall for a Tsurani, nearly Pug's height, and well proportioned. Her brown hair was tied back, and her brown eyes were framed by long, dark lashes. Pug stopped gathering the clothing and stared at her in open admiration.

She hesitated under his scrutiny, then quickly picked up the rest of the clothes and hurried off. Laurie watched her trim figure retreat, tan legs shown to good advantage by the short slave's robe.

Laurie slapped Pug's shoulder. "Ha! I told you things would be looking up."

They left the house and approached the cookhouse, where the smell of hot food set their appetites on edge. "I think you've made an impression on that girl, Pug."

Pug had never had much experience with women and felt his ears start to burn. At the slave camp much of the talk was about women, and this, more than anything else, had kept him feeling like a boy. He turned to see if Laurie was having sport with him, then saw the blond singer looking behind him. He followed Laurie's gaze and caught a glimpse of a shyly smiling face pull back from a window in the house.

THE NEXT DAY the household of the Shinzawai Family was in an uproar.

Slaves and servants hurried every which way making ready for the journey to the north. Pug and Laurie were left to themselves, as there was no one among the household staff free enough to assign them tasks.

They sat in the shade of a large willowlike tree, enjoying the novelty of free time as they observed the furore.

"These people are crazy, Pug. I've seen less preparation for caravans.

It looks as if they plan on taking everything with them."

"Maybe they are. These people no longer surprise me." Pug stood, leaning against the bole. "I've seen things that defy logic."

"True enough. But when you've seen as many different lands as I have, you learn that the more things look different, the more they are the same."

"what do you mean?"

Laurie rose and leaned on the other side of the tree. In low tones he said, "I'm not sure, but something is afoot, and we play a part, be sure."

"If we keep sharp, we may be able to turn it to our advantage. Always remember that. Should a man want something from you, you can always make a bargain, no matter what the apparent differences in your stations."

"Of course. Give him what he wants, and he'll let you live."

"You're too young to be so cynical," Laurie countered, with mirth sparkling in his eyes. "Tell you what. You leave the world-weary pose to old travelers such as myself, and I'll make sure that you don't miss a single opportunity."

Pug snorted. "what opportunity?"

"Well, for one thing," Laurie said, pointing behind Pug, "that little girl you nearly knocked over yesterday is appearing to have some difficulty in lifting those boxes." Pug, glancing back, saw the laundry girl struggling to stack several large crates ready to be loaded into wagons. "I think she might appreciate a little help, don't you think?"

Pug's confusion was evident on his face. "what . . . ?"

Laurie gave him a gentle push. "Off with you, dolt. A little help now, later . . . who knows?"

Pug stumbled. "Later?"

"Gods!" laughed Laurie, fetching Pug a playful kick in the rump.

The troubadour's humor was infectious, and Pug was smiling as he approached the girl. She was trying to lift a large wooden crate atop another. Pug took it from her. "Here, I can do that."

She stepped away, uncertain. "It's not heavy. It's just too high for me." She looked everywhere but at Pug.

Pug lifted the crate easily and placed it on top of the others, favoring his tender hand only a little.

"There you are," he said, trying to sound casual.

The girl brushed back a stray wisp of hair that had fallen into her eyes. "You're a barbarian, aren't you?" She spoke hesitantly.

Pug flinched. "You call us that. I like to think I'm as civilized as the

next man."

She blushed. "I didn't mean any offense. My people are called barbarians also. Anyone who's not a Tsurani is called that. I meant you're from that other world."

Pug nodded. "what's your name?"

She said, "Katala," then in a rush, "what is your name?"

"Pug."

She smiled. "That's a strange name. Pug." She seemed to like the sound of it.

Just then the hadonra, Septiem, an old but erect man with the bearing of a retired general, came around the house. "You two!" he snapped.

"There's work to do! Don't stand there."

Katala ran back into the house, and Pug was left hesitating before the yellow-robed estate manager. "You! what's your name?"

"Pug, sir."

"I see that you and your blond giant friend have been given nothing to do. I'll have to remedy that. Call him over."

Pug sighed. So much for their free time. He waved for Laurie to come over, and they were put to work loading wagons.

20

Estate

THE WEATHER HAD TURNED COOLER DURING THE LAST THREE WEEKS. Still it hinted at the summer's heat. The winter season in this land, if a season it properly was, lasted a mere six weeks, with brief cold rains out of the north. The trees held most of their bluish green leaves, and there was nothing to mark the passing of fall. In the four years Pug had abided in Tsuranuanni, there were none of the familiar signs that marked the passing seasons: no bird migrations, frost in the mornings, rains that froze, snow, or blooming of wild flowers. This land seemed eternally set in the soft amber of summer.

for the first few days of the journey, they had followed the highway from Jamar, northward to the city of Sulan-qu. The river Gagajin had carried a ceaseless clutter of boats and barges, while the highway was equally jammed with caravans, farmers' carts, and nobles riding in litters.

The Lord of the Shinzawai had departed the first day by boat for the Holy City, to attend the High Council. The household followed at a more leisurely pace. Hokanu paused outside the city of Sulan-qu long enough to pay a social call upon the Lady of the Acoma, and Pug and Laurie found the opportunity to gossip with another Midkemian slave, recently captured. The news of the war was disheartening. No change since the last they had heard; the stalemate continued.

At the Holy City, the Lord of the Shinzawai joined his son and the retinue on its journey to the Shinzawai estates, outside the City of Silmani. From then, the trek northward had been uneventful.

The Shinzawai caravan was approaching the boundaries of the family's northern estates. Pug and Laurie had little to do along the way except occasional chores: dumping the cook pots, cleaning up needra droppings, loading and unloading supplies. Now they were riding on the back of a wagon, feet dangling over the rear. Laurie bit into a ripe jomach fruit, something like a large green pomegranate with the flesh of a watermelon. Spitting out seeds, he said, "How's the hand?" Pug studied his right hand, examining the red puckered scar that ran across the palm. "It's still stiff. I expect it's as healed as it will ever be."

Laurie took a look. "Don't think you'll ever carry a sword again."

He grinned.

Pug laughed. "I doubt you will either. I somehow don't think they'll be finding a place for you in the Imperial Horse Lance."

Laurie spat a burst of seeds, bouncing them off the nose of the needra who pulled the wagon behind them. The six-legged beast snorted, and the driver waved his steering stick angrily at them. "Except for the fact that the Emperor doesn't have any lancers, due to the fact that he also doesn't have any horses, I can't think of a finer choice."

PUG laughed derisively.

"I'll have you know, fella-me-lad," said Laurie in aristocratic tones, "that we troubadours are often beset by a less savory sort of customer, brigands and cutthroats seeking our hard-earned wages-scant though they may be. If one doesn't develop the ability to defend oneself, one doesn't stay in business, if you catch my meaning."

Pug smiled. He knew that a troubadour was nearly sacrosanct in a town, for should he be harmed or robbed, word would spread, and no other would ever come there again. But on the road it was a different matter. He had no doubt of Laurie's ability to take care of himself, but wasn't about to let him use that pompous tone and sit without a rejoinder. As he was about to speak, though, he was cut off by shouts coming from the front of the caravan. Guards came rushing forward, and Laurie turned to his shorter companion. "What do you suppose that is all about?"

Not waiting for an answer, he jumped down and ran forward. Pug followed. As they reached the head of the caravan, behind the Lord of the Shinzawai's litter, they could see shapes advancing up the road toward them. Laurie grabbed Pug's sleeve. "Riders!"

Pug could scarcely believe his eyes, for indeed it appeared that riders were approaching along the road from the Shinzawai manor. As they got closer, he could see that, rather than riders, there was one horseman and three cho-ja, all three a rich dark blue color.

The rider, a young brown-haired Tsurani, taller than most, dismounted. His movement was clumsy, and Laurie observed, "They will never pose any military threat if that's the best seat they can keep."

Look, there is no saddle, nor bridle, only a rude hackamore fashioned from leather straps. And the poor horse looks like it hasn't been properly groomed for a month."

The curtain of the litter was pulled back as the rider approached.

The slaves put the litter down, and the Lord of the Shinzawai got out.

Hokanu had reached his father's side, from his place among the guards at the rear of the caravan, and was embracing the rider, exchanging greetings. The rider then embraced the Lord of the Shinzawai. Pug and Laurie could hear the rider say, "Father! It is good to see you."

The Shinzawai lord said, "Kasumi! It is good to see my firstborn son.

when did you return?"

"Less than a week ago. I would have come to Jamar, but I heard that you were due here, so I waited."

"I am glad. who are these with you?" He indicated the creatures.

"This," he said, pointing to the foremost, "is Strike Leader X'calak, back from fighting the short ones under the mountains on Midkemia."

The creature stepped forward and raised his right hand-very humanlike-in salute, and in a high, piping voice said, "Hail, Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai. Honors to your house."

The Lord of the Shinzawai bowed slightly from the waist. "Greetings, X'calak. Honors to your hive. The cho-ja are always welcome guests."

The creature stepped back and waited. The lord turned to look at the horse. "what is this upon which you sit, my son?"

"A horse, Father. A creature the barbarians ride into battle. I've told you of them before. It is a truly marvelous creature. On its back I can run faster than the swiftest cho-ja runner."

"How do you stay on?"

The older Shinzawai son laughed. "With great difficulty, I'm afraid.

The barbarians have tricks to it I have yet to learn."

Hokanu smiled. "Perhaps we can arrange for lessons."

Kasumi slapped him playfully on the back. "I have asked several barbarians, but unfortunately they were all dead."

"I have two here who are not." ' Kasumi looked past his brother and saw Laurie, standing a full head taller than the other slaves who had gathered around. "So I see. Well, we must ask him. Father, with your permission, I will ride back to the house and have all made ready for your homecoming."

Kamatsu embraced his son and agreed. The older son grabbed a handful of mane, and with an athletic leap, remounted. With a wave, he rode off.

Pug and Laurie quickly returned to their places on the wagon. Laurie asked, "Have you seen the like of those things before?"

Pug nodded. "Yes. The Tsurani call them the cho-ja. They live in large hive mounds, like ants. The Tsurani slaves I spoke with in the camp tell me they have been around as long as can be remembered.

They are loyal to the Empire, though I seem to remember someone saying that each hive has its own queen."

Laurie peered around the front of the wagon, hanging on with one hand. "I wouldn't like to face one on foot. Look at the way they run."

Pug said nothing. The older Shinzawai son's remark about the short ones under the mountain brought back old memories. If Tomas is alive, he thought, he is a man now. If he is alive.

THE SHINZAWAI mANOR was huge. It was easily the biggest single building short of temples and palaces-that Pug had seen. It sat atop a hill, -commanding a view of the countryside for miles. The house was square, like the one in Jamar, but several times the size. The town house could easily have fit inside this one's central garden. Behind it were the outbuildings, cookhouse, and slave quarters.

Pug craned his neck to take in the garden, for they were walking quickly through, and there was little time to absorb all of it. The hadonra, Septiem, scolded him. "Don't tarry."

Pug quickened his step and fell in beside Laurie. Still, on a brief viewing, the garden was impressive. Several shade trees had been planted beside three pools that sat in the midst of miniature trees and flowering plants. Stone benches had been placed for contemplative rest, and paths of fine pebble gravel wandered throughout. Around this tiny park the building rose, three stories tall. The top two stories had

balconies, and several staircases rose to connect them. Servants could be seen hurrying along the upper levels, but there appeared to be no one else in the garden, or at least that portion they had crossed.

They reached a sliding door, and Septiem turned to face them. In stern tones he said, "You two barbarians will watch your manners before the lords of this house, or by the gods, I'll have every inch of skin off your backs. Now make sure you do all that I've told you, or you'll wish that Master Hokanu had left you to rot in the swamps."

He slid the door to one side and announced the slaves. The command for them to enter was given, and Septiem shooed them inside.

They found themselves in a colorfully lit room, the light coming through the large translucent door covered with a painting. On the walls hung carvings, tapestries, and paintings, all done in fine style, small and delicate. The floor was covered, in Tsurani fashion, with a thick pile of cushions. Upon a large cushion Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai, sat, across from him were his two sons. All were dressed in the short robes of expensive fabric and cut they used when off duty.

Pug and Laurie stood with their eyes downcast until they were spoken to.

Hokanu spoke first. "The blond giant is called Lor-re, and the more normal-sized one is Poog."

Laurie started to open his mouth, but a quick elbow from Pug silenced him before he could speak.

The older son noticed the exchange, and said, "You would speak?"

Laurie looked up, then quickly down again. The instructions had been clear: not to speak until commanded to. Laurie wasn't sure the question was a command.

The lord of the house said, "Speak."

Laurie looked at Kasumi. "I am Laurie, master. Not Lor-ee. And my friend is Pug, not Poog."

' Hokanu looked taken aback at being corrected, but the older brother nodded and pronounced the names several times over, until he spoke them correctly. He then said, "Have you ridden horses?"

Both slaves nodded. Kasumi said, "Good. Then you can show me the



best way."

Pug's gaze wandered as much as was possible with his head down, but something caught his eye. Next to the Lord of the Shinzawai sat a game board and what looked like familiar figures. Kamatsu noticed and said, "You know this game?" He reached over and brought the board forward, so that it lay before him.

Pug said, "Master, I know the game. We call it chess."

Hokanu looked at his brother, who leaned forward. "As several have said, Father, there has been contact with the barbarians before."

His father waved away the comment. "It is a theory." To Pug he said, "Sit here and show me how the pieces move."

Pug sat and tried to remember what Kulgan had taught him. He had been an indifferent student of the game, but knew a few basic openings.

He moved a pawn forward and said, "This piece may move forward only one space, except when it is first moved, master. Then it may move two." The lord of the house nodded, motioning that he should continue.

"This piece is a knight and moves like so," said Pug.

After he had demonstrated the moves of the various pieces, the Lord of the Shinzawai said, "We call this game shah. The pieces are called by different names, but it is the same. Come, we will play."

Kamatsu gave the white pieces to Pug. He opened with a conventional king's pawn move, and Kamatsu countered. Pug played badly and was quickly beaten. The others watched the entire game without a word. When it was over, the lord said, "Do you play well, among your people?"

"No, master. I play poorly."

He smiled, his eyes wrinkling at the edges. "Then I would guess that your people are not as barbarous as is commonly held. We will play again soon."

He nodded to his older son, and Kasumi rose. Bowing to his father, he said to Pug and Laurie, "Come."

They bowed to the lord of the house and followed Kasumi out of the

room. He led them through the house, to a smaller room with sleeping pallets and cushions. "You will sleep here. My room is next door. I would have you at hand at all times."

Laurie spoke up boldly. "What does the master want of us?"

Kasumi regarded him for a moment. "You barbarians will never make good slaves. You forget your place too often."

Laurie started to stammer an apology but was cut off. "It is of little matter. You are to teach me things, Laurie. You will teach me to ride, and how to speak your language. Both of you. I would learn what those" -he paused, then made a flat, nasal wa-wa-wa sound-"noises mean when you speak to each other."

Further conversation was cut off by the sound of a single chime that reverberated throughout the house. Kasumi said, "A Great One comes.

Stay in your rooms. I must go to welcome him with my father." He hurried off, leaving the two Midkemians to sit in their new quarters wondering at this newest twist in their lives.

TwicE DUrINg the following two days, Pug and Laurie glimpsed the Shinzawai's important visitor. He was much like the Shinzawai lord in appearance, but thinner, and he wore the black robe of a Tsurani Great One. Pug asked a few questions of the house staff and gained a little information. Pug and Laurie had seen nothing that compared with the awe in which the Great Ones were held by the Tsurani. They seemed a power apart, and with what little understanding of Tsurani social reality Pug had, he couldn't exactly comprehend how they fit into the scheme of things. At first he had thought they were under some social stigma, for all he was ever told was that the Great Ones were "outside the law."

He then was made to understand, by an exasperated Tsurani slave who couldn't believe Pug's ignorance of important matters, that the Great Ones had little or no social constraints in exchange for some nameless service to the Empire.

Pug had made a discovery during this time that lightened the alien feeling of his captivity somewhat. Behind the needra pens he had found a kennel full of yapping, tail-wagging dogs. They were the only Midkemian-like animals he had seen on Kelewan, and he felt an unexplained joy at their presence. He had rushed back to their room to fetch Laurie and had brought him to the kennel. Now they sat in one of the runs, amid a group of playful canines.

Laurie laughed at their boisterous play. They were unlike the Duke's hunting hounds, being longer of leg, and more gaunt. Their ears were

pointed, and perked at every sound.

"I've seen their like before, in Gulbi. It's a town in the Great Northern Trade Route of Kesh. They are called greyhounds and are used to run down the fast cats and antelope of the grasslands near the valley of the Sun."

The kennel master, a thin, droopy-eyed slave named Rachmad, came over and watched them suspiciously. "what are you doing here?"

Laurie regarded the dour man and playfully pulled the muzzle of a rambunctious puppy. "We haven't seen dogs since we left our homeland, Rachmad. Our master is busy with the Great One, so we thought we would visit your fine kennel."

At mention of his "fine kennel" the gloomy countenance brightened considerably. "I try to keep the dogs healthy. We must keep them locked up, for they try to harry the cho-ja, who like them not at all."

for a moment Pug thought perhaps they had been taken from Midkemia as the horse had been. when he asked where they had come from, Rachmad looked at him as if he were crazy. "You speak like you have been too long in the sun. There have always been dogs." With that final pronouncement on the matter, he judged the conversation closed and left.

LaTER ThaT NIGHT, Pug awoke to find Laurie entering their room.

"where have you been?"

"Shh. you want to wake the whole household? Go back to sleep."

"where did you go?" Pug asked in hushed tones.

Laurie could be seen grinning in the dim light. "I paid a visit to a certain cook's assistant, for . . . a chat."

"Oh. Almorella?"

"Yes," came the cheerful reply. "She's quite a girl." The young slave who served in the kitchen had been making big eyes at Laurie ever since the caravan had arrived four days ago.

After a moment of silence, Laurie said, "You should cultivate a few

friends yourself. Gives a whole new look to things."

"I'll bet," Pug said, disapproval mixed with more than a little envy.

Almorella was a bright and cheerful girl, near Pug's age, with merry dark eyes.

"That little Katala, now. She has her eye on you, I'm thinking."

Cheeks burning, Pug threw a cushion at his friend. "Oh, shut up and go to sleep."

Laurie stifled a laugh. He retired to his pallet and left Pug alone in thought.

THERE WAS the faint promise of rain on the wind, and Pug welcomed the coolness he felt in its touch. Laurie was sitting astride Kasumi's horse, and the young officer stood by and watched. Laurie had directed Tsurani craftsmen as they fashioned a saddle and bridle for the mount and was now demonstrating their use.

"This horse is combat trained," Laurie shouted. "He can be neck reined"-he demonstrated by laying the reins on one side of the horse's neck, then the other-"or he can be turned by using your legs." He raised his hands and showed the older son of the house how this was done.

for three weeks they had been instructing the young noble in riding, and he had shown natural ability. Laurie jumped from the horse, and Kasumi took his place. The Tsurani rode roughly at first, the saddle feeling strange under him. As he bounced by, Pug called out, "Master, grip him firmly with your lower leg!" The horse sensed the pressure and picked up a quick trot. Rather than be troubled by the increase in speed, Kasumi looked enraptured. "Keep your heels down!" shouted Pug.

Then, without instructions from either slave, Kasumi kicked the horse hard in the sides and had the animal running over the fields.

Laurie watched him vanish across the meadow and said, "He's either a natural horseman or he's going to kill himself."

Pug nodded. "I think he's got the knack. He's certainly not lacking courage."

Laurie pulled up a long stem of grass from the ground and put it between his teeth. He hunkered down and scratched the ear of a bitch who lay at his feet, as much to distract the dog from running after the

horse as to play with her. She rolled over on her back and playfully chewed his hand.

Laurie turned his attention to Pug. "I wonder what game our young friend is playing at."

Pug shrugged. "what do you mean?"

"Remember when we first arrived? I heard Kasumi was about to head out with his cho-ja companions. Well, those three cho-ja soldiers left this morning-which is why Bethel here is out of her pen-and I heard some gossip that the orders of the older son of the Shinzawai were suddenly changed. Put that together with these riding and language lessons and what do you have?"

Pug stretched. "I don't know."

"I don't know either." Laurie sounded disgusted. "But these matters are of high import." He looked across the plain and said lightly, "All I ever wanted to do was to travel and tell my stories, sing my songs, and someday find a widow who owned an inn."

Pug laughed. "I think you would find tavern keeping dull business after all this fine adventure."

"Some fine adventuring. I'm riding along with a bunch of provincial militia and run right smack into the entire Tsurani army. Since then I've been beaten several times, spent over four months mucking about in the swamps, walked over half this world-

""Ridden in a wagon,  
as I remember."

"Well, traveled over half this world, and now I'm giving riding lessons to Kasumi Shinzawai, older son of a lord of Tsuranuanni. Not the stuff great ballads are made of."

Pug smiled ruefully. "You could have been four years in the swamps.

Consider yourself lucky. At least you can count on being here tomorrow.

At least as long as Septiem doesn't catch you creeping around the kitchen late at night."

Laurie studied Pug closely. "I know you're joking. About Septiem, I

mean. It has occurred to me several times to ask you, Pug. Why do you never speak of your life before you were captured?" Pug looked away absently. "I guess it's a habit I picked up in the swamp camp.

It doesn't pay to remind yourself of what you used to be.

I've seen brave men die because they couldn't forget they were born free." Laurie pulled at the dog's ear. "But things are different here."

"Are they? Remember what you said back in Jamar about a man wanting something from you. I think the more comfortable you become here, the easier it is for them to get whatever it is they want from you.

This Shinzawai lord is no one's fool." Seemingly shifting topics, he said, "Is it better to train a dog or horse with a whip or with kindness?"

Laurie looked up. "what? Why, with kindness, but you have to use discipline also."

Pug nodded. "We are being shown the same consideration as Bethel and her kind, I think. But we still are slaves. Never forget that."

Laurie looked out over the fieldd for a long time and said nothing.

The pair were roused from their thoughts by the shouts of the older son of the house as he rode back into view. He pulled the horse up before them and jumped down. "He flies," he said, in his broken King's Tongue. Kasumi was an apt student and was picking up the language quickly. He supplemented his language lessons with a constant stream of questions about the lands and people of Midkemia. There was not a single aspect of life in the Kingdom that he seemed uninterested in.

He had asked for examples of the most mundane things, such as the manner in which one bargains with tradespeople, and the proper forms of address when speaking to people of different ranks.

Kasumi led the horse back to the shed that had been built for him, and Pug watched for any sign of footsoreness. They had fashioned shoes for him from wood treated with resin, by trial and error, but these seemed to be holding up well enough. As he walked, Kasumi said, "I have been thinking about a thing. I don't understand how your King rules, with all you have said about this Congress of Lords. Please explain this thing."

Laurie looked at Pug with an eyebrow raised. while no more an

authority on Kingdom politics than Laurie, he seemed better able to explain what he knew. Pug said, "The congress elects the King, though it is mostly a matter of form."

"Form?"

"A tradition. The heir to the throne is always elected, except when there is no clear successor. It is considered the best way to stem civil war, for the ruling of the congress is final." He explained how the Prince of Kronдор had deferred to his nephew, and how the congress had acquiesced to his wishes. "How is it with the Empire?"

Kasumi thought, then said, "Perhaps not so different. Each emperor is the elect of the gods, but from what you have told me he is unlike your King. He rules in the Holy City, but his leadership is spiritual. He protects us from the wrath of the gods." Laurie asked, "who then rules?"

They reached the shed, and Kasumi took the saddle and bridle off the horse and began rubbing him down. "Here it is different from your land." He seemed to have difficulty with the language and shifted into Tsurani. "A Ruling Lord of a family is the absolute authority upon his estate. Each family belongs to a clan, and the most influential lord in the clan is Warchief. Within that clan, each other lord of a family holds certain powers depending upon influence. The Shinzawai belong to the Kanazawai Clan. We are the second most POWERFUL family in that clan next to the Keda. My father in his youth was commander of the clan armies, a Warchief, what you would call a general. The position of families shifts from generation to generation, so that it is unlikely I will reach so exalted a position.

"The leading lords of each clan sit in the High Council. They advise the Warlord. He rules in the name of the Emperor, though the Emperor could overrule him."

"Does the Emperor in fact ever overrule the Warlord?" asked Laurie.

"Never."

"How is the Warlord chosen?" asked Pug.

"It is difficult to explain. when the old Warlord dies, the clans meet.

It is a large gathering of lords, for not only the council comes, but also the heads of every family. They meet and plot, and sometimes blood feuds develop, but in the end a new Warlord is elected."

Pug brushed back the hair from his eyes. "Then what is to keep the Warlord's clan from claiming the office, if they are the most powerful?"

Kasumi looked troubled. "It is not an easy thing to explain.

Perhaps you would have to be Tsurani to understand. There are laws, but more important, there are customs. No matter how POWERFUL a clan becomes, or a family within it, only the lord of one of five families may be elected Warlord. They are the Keda, Tonmargu, Minwanabi, Oaxatucan, and the Xacatecas. So there are only five lords who may be considered. This Warlord is an Oaxatucan, so the light of the Kanazawai clan burns dimly. His clan, the Omechan, is in ascension now. Only the Minwanabi rival them, and for the present they are allied in the war effort. That is the way of it."

Laurie shook his head. "This family and clan business makes our own politics seem simple."

Kasumi laughed. "That is not politics. Politics is the province of the parties."

"Parties?" asked Laurie, obviously getting lost in the conversation.

"There are many parties. The Blue Wheel, the Golden flower, the Jade Eye, the Party for Progress, the War Party, and others. Families may belong to different parties, each trying to further their own needs.

Sometimes families from the same clan will belong to different parties.

Sometimes they switch alliances to suit their needs for the moment.

Other times they may support two parties at once, or none."

"It seems a most unstable government," remarked Laurie.

Kasumi laughed. "It has lasted for over two thousand years. We have an old saying: 'In the High Council, there is no brother.' Remember that and you may understand."

Pug weighed his next question carefully. "Master, in all this you



have not mentioned the Great Ones. why is that?"

Kasumi stopped rubbing down the horse and looked at Pug for a moment, then resumed his ministrations. "They have nothing to do with politics. They are outside the law and have no clan." He paused again. "Why do you ask?"

"It is only that they seem to command a great amount of respect, and since one has called here so recently, I thought you could enlighten me."

"They are given respect because the fate of the Empire is at all times in their hands. It is a grave responsibility. They renounce all their ties, and few have personal lives beyond their community of magicians.

Those with families live apart, and their children are sent to live with their former families when they come of age. It is a difficult thing. They make many sacrifices."

Pug watched Kasumi closely. He seemed somehow troubled by what he was saying. "The Great One who came to see my father was, when a boy, a member of this family. He was my uncle. It is difficult for us now, for he must observe the formalities and cannot claim kinship. It would be better if he stayed away, I think." The last was spoken softly.

"Why is that, master?" Laurie asked, in hushed tones.

"Because it is hard for Hokanu. Before he became my brother, he was that Great One's son."

They finished caring for the horse and left the shack. Bethel ran ahead, for she knew it was close to feeding time. As they passed the kennel, Rachmad called her over, and she joined the other dogs.

The entire way there was no conversation, and Kasumi entered his room with no further remark for either of the Midkemians. Pug sat on his pallet, waiting for the call for dinner, and thought about what he had learned. For all their strange ways, the Tsurani were much like other men. He found this somehow both comforting and troublesome.

Two WEEKS lATER, Pug was faced with another problem to mull over.

Katala had been making it obvious she was less than pleased with Pug's lack of attention. In little ways at first, then with more blatant signs, she had tried to spark his interest. Finally things had come to a head when he had run into her behind the cook shed earlier that afternoon.

Laurie and Kasumi were trying to build a small lute, with the aid of a Shinzawai woodcrafter. Kasumi had expressed interest in the music of the troubadour and, the last few days, had watched closely while Laurie argued with the artisan over the selection of proper grains, the way to cut the wood, and the manner of fashioning the instrument. He was perplexed about whether or not needra gut would make suitable strings, and a thousand other details. Pug had found all this less than engrossing, and after a few days had found every excuse to wander off.

The smell of curing wood reminded him too much of cutting trees in the swamp for him to enjoy being around the resin pots in the woodcarver's shed.

This afternoon he had been lying in the shade of the cook shed when Katala came around the corner. His stomach constricted at the sight of her. He thought her very attractive, but each time he had tried to speak to her, he found he couldn't think of anything to say. He would simply make a few inane remarks, become embarrassed, then hurry off.

Lately he had taken to saying nothing. As she had approached this afternoon, he had smiled noncommittally, and she started to walk past.

Suddenly she had turned and looked as if near to tears.

"what is the matter with me? Am I so ugly that you can't stand the sight of me?"

Pug had sat speechless, his mouth open. She had stood for a moment, then kicked him in the leg. "Stupid barbarian," she had sniffed, then run off.

Now he sat in his room, feeling confused and uneasy over this afternoon's encounter. Laurie was carving pegs for his lute. Finally he put knife and wood aside and said, "what's troubling you, Pug? You look as if they're promoting you to slave master and sending you back to the swamp."

Pug lay back on his pallet, staring at the ceiling. "It's Katala."

"Oh," Laurie said.

"what do you mean, 'Oh'?"

"Nothing, except that Almorella tells me the girl has been impossible for the last two weeks, and you look about as bright as a poleaxed steer

these days. What's the matter?"

"I don't know. She's just . . . she's just . . . She kicked me today."

Laurie threw back his head and laughed. "Why in the name of heaven did she do that?"

"I don't know. She just kicked me."

'..What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything."

"Ha." Laurie exploded with mirth. "That's the trouble, Pug. There is only one thing I know of that a woman hates more than a man she doesn't like paying her too much attention-and that's lack of attention from a man she does like."

Udg looked despondent. "I thought it was something like that."

Surprise registered on Laurie's face. "what is it? Don't you like ' her?" Leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, Pug said "It's not that. I like her. She's very pretty and seems nice enough. It's just that . . ."

"What?"

Pug glanced sharply over at his friend, to see if he was being mocked.

;Laurie was smiling, but in a friendly, reassuring way. Pug continued.

"It's just . . . there's someone else."

Laurie's mouth fell open, then snapped shut. "Who? Except for Almorella, Katala's the prettiest wench I've seen on this gods-forsaken world." He sighed. "In honesty, she's prettier than Almorella, though only a little. Besides, I've not seen you ever speak to another woman, and I'd have noticed you skulking off with anyone."

Pug shook his head and looked down. "No, Laurie. I mean back home."

Laurie's mouth popped open again, then he fell over backward and groaned. " 'Back home!' what am I to do with this child? He's bereft of all wit!" He pulled himself up on an elbow and said, "Can this be

Pug speaking? The lad who counsels me to put the past behind? The one who insists that dwelling on how things were at home leads only to a quick death?"

Pug ignored the sting of the questions. "This is different."

"How is it different? By Ruthia-who in her more tender moments protects fools, drunks, and minstrel-how can you tell me this is different? Do you imagine for a moment you have one hope in ten times ten thousand of ever seeing this girl again, whoever she is?"

"I know, but thinking of Carline has kept me from losing my mind more times . . ." He sighed loudly. "We all need one dream, Laurie."

Laurie studied his young friend for a quiet moment. "Yes, Pug, we all need one dream. Still," he added brightly, "a dream is one thing, a living, breathing, warm woman is another." Seeing Pug become irritated at the remark, he switched topics. "Who is Carline, Pug?"

"My lord Borric's daughter."

Laurie's eyes grew round. "Princess Carline?" Pug nodded. Laurie's voice showed amusement. "The most eligible noble daughter in the Western Realm after the daughter of the Prince of Krondor? There are sides to you I never would have thought possible! Tell me about her." Pug began to speak slowly at first, telling of his boyhood infatuation for her, then of how their relationship developed. Laurie remained silent, putting aside questions, letting Pug relieve himself of the pent-up emotions of years. Finally Pug said, "Perhaps that's what bothers me so much about Katala. In certain ways Katala's like Carline. They've both got strong wills and make their moods known."

Laurie nodded, not saying anything. Pug lapsed into silence, then after a moment said, "when I was at Crydee, I thought for a time I was in love with Carline. But I don't know. Is that strange?"

Laurie shook his head. "No, Pug. There are many ways to love someone. Sometimes we want love so much, we're not too choosy about who we love. Other times we make love such a pure and noble thing, no poor human can ever meet our vision. But for the most part, love is a recognition, an opportunity to say, 'There is something about you I cherish.' It doesn't entail marriage, or even physical love. There's love of parents, love of city or nation, love of life, and love of people. All different, all love. But tell me, do you find your feelings for Katala much as they were for Carline?"

Pug shrugged and smiled. "No, they're not, not quite the same. With Carline, I felt as if I had to keep her away, you know, at arm's length.

Sort of keeping control of what went on, I think."

Laurie probed lightly. "And Katala?"

Pug shrugged again. "I don't know. It's different. I don't feel as if I have to keep her under control. It's more as if there are things I want to tell her, but I don't know how. Like the way I got all jammed up inside when she smiled at me the first time. I could talk to Carline, when she kept quiet and let me. Katala keeps quiet, but I don't know what to say." He paused a moment, then made a sound that was half sigh, half groan. "Just thinking about Katala makes me hurt, Laurie."

Laurie lay back, a friendly chuckle escaping his lips. "Aye, it's well I've known that ache. And I must admit your taste runs to interesting women. From what I can see, Katala's a prize. And the Princess Carline . . ."

A little snappishly, Pug said, "I'll make a point of introducing you when we get back."

Laurie ignored the tone. "I'll hold you to that. Look, all I mean is it seems you've developed an excellent knack for finding worthwhile women." A little sadly, he said, "I wish I could claim as much. My life has been mostly caught up with tavern wenches, farmers' daughters, common street whores. I don't know what to tell you."

"Laurie," said Pug. Laurie sat up and looked at his friend. "I don't know . . . I don't know what to do."

Laurie studied Pug a moment, then comprehension dawned and he threw back his head, laughing. He could see Pug's anger rising and put his hands up in supplication. "I'm sorry, Pug. I didn't mean to embarrass you. It was just not what I expected to hear."

Somewhat placated, Pug said, "I was young when I was captured, less than sixteen years of age. I was never of a size like the other boys, so the ggirls didn't pay much attention to me, until Carline, I mean, and after I became a squire, they were afraid to talk to me. After that .

. . Damn it all, Laurie. I've been in the swamps for four years.

what chance have I had to know a woman?"

Laurie sat quietly for a moment, and the tension left the room.

"Pug, I never would have imagined, but as you said, when have you had the time?"

"Laurie, what am I to do?"

"What would you like to do?" Laurie looked at Pug, his expression showing concern.

"I would like to . . . go to her. I think. I don't know."

Laurie rubbed his chin. "Look, Pug, I never thought I'd have this sort of talk with anyone besides a son someday if I ever have one. I wasn't meaning to make sport of you. You just caught me off guard."

He looked away, gathering his thoughts, then said, "My father threw me out when I was just shy twelve years old, I was the eldest boy, and he had seven other mouths to feed. And I was never much for farming.

A neighbor boy and I walked to Tyr-Sog and spent a year living on the streets. He joined a mercenary band as a cook's monkey and later became a soldier. I hooked up with a traveling troupe of musicians. I apprenticed to a jongleur from whom I learned the songs, sagas, and ballads, and I traveled.

"I came quickly to my growth, a man at thirteen. There was a woman in the troupe, a widow of a singer, traveling with her brothers and cousins. She was just past twenty, but seemed very old to me then.

She was the one who introduced me to the games of men and women." He stopped for a moment, reliving memories long forgotten.

Laurie smiled. "It was over fifteen years ago, Pug. But I can still see ' her face. We were both a little lost. It was never a planned thing. It just happened one afternoon on the road.

"She was . . . kind." He looked at Pug. "She knew I was scared, despite my bravado." He smiled and closed his eyes. "I can still see the sun in the trees behind her face, and the smell of her mingled with the scent of wildflowers." Opening his eyes he said, "We spent the next two years' together, while I learned to sing. Then I left the troupe."

"what happened?" Pug asked, for this was a new story to him.

Laurie"; had never spoken of his youth before.

"She married again. He was a good man, an innkeeper on the road from Malac's Cross to Durrony's Male. His wife had died the year before of fever, leaving him with two small sons. She tried to explain things to me, but I wouldn't listen. What did I know? I was not quite sixteen, and the world was a simple place."

Pug nodded. "I know what you mean." Laurie said, "Look, what I'm trying to say is that I understand your problem. I can explain how things work. . . ."

Pug said, "I know that. I wasn't raised by monks."

"But you don't know how things work."

Pug nodded as they both laughed. "I think you should just go to the girl and make your feelings known," said Laurie.

"Just talk to her?"

"Of course. Love is like a lot of things, it is always best done with the head. Save mindless efforts for mindless things. Now go."

"Now?" Pug looked panic-stricken. "You can't start any sooner, right?"

Pug nodded and without a word left. He walked down the dark and quiet corridors, outside to the slave quarters, and found his way to her door. He raised his hand to knock on the door frame, then stopped. and stood quietly for a moment trying to make up his mind what to do when the door slid open. Almorella stood in the doorway, clutching a robe about her, her hair disheveled. "Oh," she whispered, "I thought it was Laurie. Wait a moment." She disappeared into the room, then shortly reappeared with a bundle of things in her arms. She patted Pugs arm and set off in the direction of his and Laurie's room. Pug stood at the door, then slowly entered. He could see Katala lying under a blanket on her pallet. He stepped over to where she lay and squatted next to her.

He touched her shoulder and softly spoke her name. She came awake and sat up suddenly, gathered her blanket, around her, and said, "what are you doing here?"

"I . . . I wanted to talk to you." Once started, the words came out in a tumbling rush. "I am sorry if I've done anything to make you angry with me. Or haven't done anything. I mean, Laurie said that if you don't do something when someone expects you to, that's as bad as paying too much attention. I'm not sure, you see." She covered her mouth to hide a giggle, for she could see his distress in spite of the darkness. "~.

"What I mean . . . what I mean is I'm sorry. Sorry for what ;. I've done.

Or didn't do . . ."

She silenced him by placing her fingertips across his mouth. Her arm snaked out and around his neck, pulling his head downward. She kissed him slowly, then said, "Silly. Go close the door."

THEY LAY TOGETHER, Katala's arm across Pug's chest, while he stared at the ceiling. She made sleepy sounds, and he ran his hands through her thick hair and across her soft shoulder.

"What?" she asked sleepily.

"I was just thinking that I haven't been happier since I was made a member of the Duke's court."

'good." She came a bit more awake. "what's a duke?"

Pug thought for a moment. "It's like a lord here, only different.

My duke was cousin to the King, and the third most powerful man in the Kingdom."

She snuggled closer to him. "You must have been important to be part of the court of such a man."

"Not really, I did him a service and was rewarded for it." He didn't think he wanted to bring up Carline's name here. Somehow his boyhood fantasies about the Princess seemed childish in light of this night.

Katala rolled over onto her stomach. She raised her head and rested it on a hand, forming a triangle with her arm. "I wish things could be different."

"How so, love?"

"My father was a farmer in Thuril. We are among the last free people in Kelewan. If we could go there, you could take a position with the Coaldra, the Council of Warriors. They always have need for resourceful men. Then we could be together."

"We're together here, aren't we?"

Katala kissed him lightly. "Yes, dear Pug, we are. But we both remember what it was to be free, don't we?"



Pug sat up. "I try to put that sort of thing out of my mind."

She put her arms around him, holding him as she would a child. "It must have been terrible in the swamps. We hear stories, but no one ~ knows," she said softly.

"It is well that you don't."

She kissed him, and soon they returned to that timeless, safe place shared by two, all thoughts of things terrible and alien forgotten.

for the rest of the night they took pleasure in each other, discovering a depth of feeling new to each. Pug couldn't tell if she had known other men before, and didn't ask. It wasn't important to him. The only important thing was being there, with her, now. He was awash in a sea of new delights and emotions. He didn't understand his feelings entirely, but there was little doubt what he felt for Katala was more real, more compelling, than the worshipful, confused longings he had known when with Carline.

WEEKS PASSED, and Pug found his life falling into a reassuring routine.

He spent occasional evenings with the Lord of the Shinzawai playing chess-or shah, as it was called here-and their conversations gave him insights into the nature of Tsurani life. He could no longer think of these people as aliens, for he saw their daily life as similar to what he had known as a boy. There were surprising differences, such as the strict adherence to an honor code, but the similarities far outnumbered the differences.

Katala became the centerpiece of his existence. They came together whenever they found time, sharing meals, a quick exchange of words, and every night that they could steal together. Pug was sure the other slaves in the household knew of their nighttime assignations, but the proximity of people in Tsurani life had bred a certain blindness to the personal habits of others, and no one cared a great deal about the comings and goings of two slaves.

Several weeks after his first night with Katala, Pug found himself alone with Kasumi, as Laurie was embroiled in another shouting match with the woodcrafter who was finishing his lute. The man considered Laurie somewhat unreasonable in objecting to the instrument's being finished in bright yellow paint with purple trim. And he saw absolutely no merit in leaving the natural wood tones exposed. Pug and Kasumi left the singer explaining to the woodcrafter the requirements of wood for proper resonance, seemingly intent on convincing by volume as much as by logic.

They walked toward the stable area. Several more captured horses had

been purchased by agents of the Lord of the Shinzawai and had been sent to his estate, at what Pug took to be a great deal of expense and some political maneuvering. Whenever alone with the slaves, Kasumi spoke the King's Tongue and insisted they call him by name. He showed a quickness in learning the language that matched his quickness in learning to ride.

"Friend Laurie," said the older son of the house, "will never make a proper slave from a Tsurani point of view. He has no appreciation of our arts."

Pug listened to the argument that still could be heard coming from the wood-carver's building. "I think it more the case of his being concerned over the proper appreciation of his art." They reached the corral and watched as a spirited grey stallion reared and whinnied at their approach. The horse had been brought in a week ago, securely tied by several leads to a wagon, and had repeatedly tried to attack anyone who came close.

"Why do you think this one is so troublesome, Pug?"

Pug watched the magnificent animal run around the corral, herding the other horses away from the men. When the mares and another, less dominant, stallion were safely away, the grey turned and watched the two men warily.

"I'm not sure. Either he's simply a badly tempered animal, perhaps from mishandling, or he's a specially trained war-horse. Most of our war mounts are trained not to shy in battle, to remain silent when held, to respond to their rider's command in times of stress. A few, mostly ridden by lords, are specially trained to obey only their master, and they are weapons as much as transport, being schooled to attack. He may be one of these."

Kasumi watched him closely as he pawed the ground and tossed his head. "I shall ride him someday," he said. "In any event, he will sire a strong line. We now number five mares, and Father has secured another five. They will arrive in a few weeks, and we are scouring every estate in the Empire to find more." Kasumi got a far-off look and mused, "When I was first upon your world, Pug, I hated the sight of horses. They rode down upon us, and our soldiers died. But then I came to see what magnificent creatures they are. There were other prisoners, when I was still back on your world, who said you have noble families who are known for nothing so much as the fine stock of horses they breed.

Someday the finest horses in the Empire shall be Shinzawai horses."

"By the look of these, you have a good start, though from what little I know, I think you need a larger stock for breeding."

"We shall have as many as it takes."

"Kasumi, how can your leaders spare these captured animals from the war effort? You must surely see the need to quickly build mounted units if you are going to advance your conquest."

Kasumi's face took on a rueful expression. "Our leaders, for the most part, are tradition-bound, Pug. They refuse to see any wisdom in training cavalry. They are fools. Your horsemen ride over our warriors, and yet they pretend we cannot learn anything, calling your people barbarians. I once sieged a castle in your homeland, and those who defended taught me much about warcraft. Many would brand me traitor for saying such, but we have held our own only by force of numbers. For the most part, your generals have more skill. Trying to keep one's soldiers alive, rather than sending them to their death, teaches a certain craftiness.

"No, the truth of the matter is we are led by men wh~" He stopped, realizing he was speaking dangerously. "The truth is," he said at last, "we are as stiff-necked a people as you."

He studied Pug's face for a moment, then smiled. "We raided for horses during the first year, so that the Warlord's Great Ones could study the beasts, to see if they were intelligent allies, like our cho-ja, or merely animals. It was a fairly comical scene. The Warlord insisted he be the first to try to ride a horse. I suspect he chose one much like this big grey, for no sooner did he approach the animal than the horse attacked, nearly killing him. His honor won't permit any other to ride when he failed. And I think he was fearful of trying again with another animal. Our Warlord, Almecho, is a man of considerable pride and temper, even for a Tsurani."

Pug said, "Then how can your father continue to purchase captured horses? And how can you ride in defiance of his order?"

Kasumi's smile broadened. "My father is a man of considerable influence in the council. Our politics is strangely twisted, and there are ways to bend any command, even from the Warlord or High Council, and any order, save one from the Light of Heaven himself. But most of all it is because these horses are here, and the Warlord is not." He smiled.

"The Warlord is supreme only in the field. Upon this estate, none may question my father's will."

Since coming to the estate of the Shinzawai, Pug had been troubled by whatever Kasumi and his father were plotting. That they were embroiled in some Tsurani political intrigue he doubted not, but what it might prove to be he had no idea. A powerful lord like Kamatsu would not spend this much effort satisfying a whim of even a son as favored as Kasumi. Still, Pug knew better than to involve himself any more than he was involved by circumstance. He changed the topic of conversation. "Kasumi, I was wondering something."

"Yes?"

"What is the law regarding the marriage of slaves?"

Kasumi seemed unsurprised by the question. "Slaves may marry with their master's permission. But permission is rarely given. Once married, a man and wife may not be separated, nor can children be sold away so long as the parents live. That is the law. Should a married couple live a long time, an estate could become burdened with three or four generations of slaves, many more than they could economically support.

But occasionally permission is granted. Why, do you wish Katala for your wife?

Pug looked surprised. "You know?"

Without arrogance Kasumi said, "Nothing occurs upon my father's estates that he is ignorant of, and he confides in me. It is a great honor.

Pug nodded thoughtfully. "I don't know yet. I feel much for her, but something holds me back. It's as if . . ." He shrugged, at a loss for words.

Kasumi regarded him closely for a time, then said, "it is by my father's will you live and by his whim how you live." Kasumi stopped for a minute, and Pug became painfully aware of how large a gulf still stood between the two men, one the son of a POWERFUL lord and the other the lowest of his father's property, a slave. The false veneer of friendship was ripped away, and Pug again knew what he had learned in the swamp: here life was cheap, and only this man's pleasure, or his father's, stood between Pug and destruction.

As if reading Pug's mind, Kasumi said, "Remember, Pug, the law is strict. A slave may never be freed. Still, there is the swamp, and there is here. And to us of Tsuranuanni, you of the Kingdom are very impatient."

Pug knew Kasumi was trying to tell him something, something perhaps important. For all his openness at times, Kasumi could easily revert to a Tsurani manner Pug could only call cryptic. There was an unvoiced tension behind Kasumi's words, and Pug thought it best not to press.

Changing the topic of conversation again, he asked, "How goes the war, Kasumi?"

Kasumi sighed, "Badly for both sides." He watched the grey stallion.

"We fight along stable lines, unchanged in the last three years. Our last two offensives were blunted, but your army also could make no gains.

Now weeks pass without fighting. Then your countrymen raid one of our enclaves, and we return the compliment. Little is accomplished except the spilling of blood. It is all very senseless, and there is little honor to be won."

Pug was surprised. Everything he had seen of the Tsurani reinforced Meecham's observation of years ago, that the Tsurani were a very warlike race. Everywhere he had looked when traveling to this estate, he had seen soldiers. Both sons of the house were soldiers, as had been their father in his youth. Hokanu was First Strike Leader of his father's garrison, due to his being the Lord of the Shinzawai's second son, but his dealing with the slave master at the swamp camp showed a ruthless efficiency in Hokanu, and Pug knew it to be no quirk. He was Tsurani, and the Tsurani code was taught at a very early age, and fiercely followed.

Kasumi sensed he was being studied and said, "I fear I am becoming softened by your outlandish ways, Pug." He paused. "Come, tell me more of your people, and what . . ." Kasumi froze. He seized Pug's arm and cocked his head, listening. After a brief instant he said, "No!

It can't be!" Suddenly he wheeled and shouted, "Raid! The Thun!"

Pug listened and in the distance could hear the faint rumbling, as if a herd of horses were galloping over the plains. He climbed upon the rail of the corral and looked into the distance. A large meadow stretched away behind the corral ending at the edge of a lightly wooded area.

while the alarm sounded behind him, he could see forms emerging from the tree line.

Pug watched in terrible fascination as the creatures called Thun came racing toward the estate house. They grew in stature as they ran furiously toward where Pug waited. They were large, centaurlike beings, looking like mounted riders in the distance. Rather than horselike, the lower body was reminiscent of a large deer or an elk, but more heavily muscled. The upper body was completely manlike, but the face resembled nothing so much as an ape with a long snout. The entire body, except the face, was covered by a medium-length fur, mottled grey and white. Each creature carried a club or ax, the head being stone lashed to the wooden haft.

Hokanu and the household guard came running from the soldiers' building and took up positions near the corral. Archers readied their

bows, and swordsmen stood in ranks, ready to accept the charge.

Suddenly Laurie was at Pug's side, holding his nearly finished lute.  
"what?"

"ThUn raid!"

Laurie stood as fascinated by the sight as Pug. Suddenly he put his lute aside, then jumped into the corral. "What do you think you're doing?" yelled Pug.

The troubadour dodged a protective feint by the grey stallion and jumped upon the back of another horse, the dominant mare of the small herd. "Trying to get the animals safely away."

Pug nodded and opened the gate. Laurie rode the horse out, but the grey kept the others from following, herding them back. Pug hesitated for a minute, then said, "Algon, I hope you knew what you taught." He walked calmly toward the stallion, silently trying to convey a sense of command. When the stallion put back his ears and snorted at him, Pug said, "Stand!"

The horse's ears cocked at the command, and it seemed to be deciding.

Pug knew timing was critical and did not break the rhythm of his approach. The horse studied him as he came alongside, and Pug said, "stand!" again. Then before the animal could bolt, he grabbed a handful of mane and was up on its back.

The battle-trained war-horse, whether by design or luck, decided Pug was close enough to his former master to respond. Perhaps it was due to the clamor of battle around, but for whatever reason, the grey leaped forward in response to Pug's leg commands and was out the gate at a run. Pug gripped with his legs for his life. As the horse cleared the gate, Pug shouted, "Laurie, get the others!" as the stallion turned to the left.

Pug glanced over his shoulder and saw the other animals following the herd leader as Laurie brought her past the gate.

Pug saw Kasumi running from the tack house, a saddle in his hand, and shouted, "Whoa!" setting as hard a seat as he could manage bareback.

The stallion halted and Pug commanded, "Stand!" The grey pawed the ground in anticipation of a fight. Kasumi shouted as he approached, "Keep the horses from fighting. This is a Blood Raid, and the ThUn will not retreat until each has killed at least once." He called for Laurie to stop, and when the small herd was milling about, he quickly saddled a horse and turned it away from the others.

Pug kicked, and the grey and the mare Laurie rode led the remaining four horses to the side of the estate house. They kept the animals closely bunched out of sight of the attacking Thun.

A soldier came running around the corner of the house, carrying weapons. He reached Pug and Laurie and shouted, "My master Kasumi commands you defend the horses with your lives."- He handed the two slaves each a sword and shield, then turned and dashed back toward the fighting.

Pug regarded the strange sword and shield, lighter by half than any he had ever trained with. A shrill cry interrupted his examination as Kasumi came riding around the house, in a running fight with a Thun warrior. The eldest son of the Shinzawai rode well, and though he had little training in fighting from horseback, he was a skilled swordsman.

His inexperience was offset by the Thun's lack of experience with horses, for while it was not unlike fighting one of his own kind, the ~ horse was also attacking, biting at the creature's chest and face. Catching wind of the ThUn, Pug's grey reared and nearly threw him.

He held fiercely to the mane and gripped tightly with his lower legs. The other horses neighed, and Pug fought to keep his from charging. Laurie shouted, "They don't like the way those things smell. Look at the way Kasumi's horse is acting."

Another of the creatures came into sight, and Laurie let out a whoop and rode to intercept. They came together in a clash of weapons, and Laurie took the ThUn club blow on his shield. His own sword struck the creature across the chest, and it cried out in a strange, guttural language, staggering for a moment, then falling.

Pug heard a scream from inside the house and turned to see one of the thin sliding doors erupt outward as a body hurled through it. A stunned house slave staggered to his feet, then collapsed, blood welling up from a wound on his head. Other figures came scurrying through the door.

Pug saw Katala and Almorella running from the house with the others, a ThUn warrior in pursuit. The creature bore down upon Katala, club raised high overhead.

Pug shouted her name, and the grey sensed his rider's alarm. Without command the huge war-horse sprang forward, intercepting the Thun as it closed with the slave girl. The horse was enraged, from the sounds of battle or the ThUn smell. It crashed heavily into the ThUn, biting and lashing out with heavy forelegs, and the ThUn's legs went out from under it. Pug was thrown by the impact and landed heavily. He lay dazed for a moment, then he climbed to his feet. He staggered to where Katala sat huddled and pulled her away from the maddened stallion.

The grey reared above the still ThUn, and hooves came flashing down.

Again and again the war-horse struck at the Thun, until there was no doubt of there being a breath of life left in the fallen creature.

Pug shouted for the horse to halt and stand, and with a contemptuous snort, the animal ceased the attack, but it kept its ears pinned back, and Pug could see it quiver. Pug approached it and stroked its neck, until the animal stopped trembling.

Then it was quiet. Pug looked about and saw Laurie riding after the scattering horses. He left his own mount and returned to Katala. She sat trembling upon the grass, Almorella at her side.

Kneeling before her, he said, "Are you all right?"

She took a deep breath, then gave him a frightened smile. "Yes, but I was sure I was going to be trampled for a minute."

Pug looked at the slave girl who had come to mean so much to him and said, "I thought so, too." Suddenly they were both smiling at each other. Almorella stood and made some comment about seeing to the others. "I was so afraid you'd been hurt," Pug said. "I thought I would lose my mind when I saw you running from that creature."

Katala put her hand upon Pug's cheek, and he realized they were wet with tears, "I was so frightened for you," he said.

"And I for you. I thought you'd be killed the way you came crashing into the ThUn." Then she was weeping. She came slowly into his arms.

"I don't know what I would do if you were killed." Pug gripped her with all his strength. They sat that way for a few minutes, until Katala regained her composure. Gently pulling away from Pug, she said, "The estate is a shambles. Septiem will have a thousand things for us to do."

She began to stand, and Pug gripped her hand.

Rising before her he said, "I didn't know, before I mean. I love you, Katala."

She smiled at him, touching his cheek. "And I you, Pug."

Their moment of discovery was interrupted by the appearance of the Lord of the Shinzawai and his younger son. Looking around, he surveyed the damage to his house as Kasumi rode around the corner, splattered in blood.



Kasumi saluted his father and said, "They have fled, I have ordered men dispatched to the northern watch forts. They must have overwhelmed one of the garrisons to have broken through."

The Lord of the Shinzawai nodded he understood and turned to enter his house, calling for his First Adviser and his other senior servants to report the damage to him.

Katala whispered to Pug, "We'll talk later," and answered the hoarse shouts of the hadonra, Septiem. Pug joined Laurie, who had ridden up to Kasumi's side.

The minstrel looked at the dead creatures on the ground and said, "What are they?"

Kasumi said, "Thun. They're nomadic creatures of the northern tundra.

We have forts along the foothills of the mountains separating our estates from their lands, at every pass. Once they roamed these ranges until we drove them north. Occasionally they seek to return to the warmer lands of the south." He pointed to a talisman tied in the fur of one of the creatures. "This was a Blood Raid. They are all young males, unproved in their bands, without mates. They failed in the summer rites of combat and were banished from the herd by the stronger males.

They had to come south, killing at least one Tsurani before they would be allowed to return to their band. Each would have to return with a Tsurani head, or not come back. It is their custom. Those who escaped will be hunted down, for they will not cross back to their home range."

Laurie shook his head. "Does this happen often?"

"Every year," said Hokanu with a wry smile. "Usually the watch forts turn them back, but it must have been a large herd this year. Many must have already returned to the north with heads taken from our men at the forts."

Kasumi said, "They must have killed two patrols, as well." He shook his head. "We've lost between sixty and a hundred men."

Hokanu seemed to reflect his older brother's unhappiness at the setback. "I will personally lead a patrol to see to the damage."

Kasumi gave him permission, and he left. Kasumi turned toward Laurie. "The horses?" Laurie pointed to where the stallion Pug had ridden stood watch over a small herd.

Suddenly Pug spoke up. "Kasumi, I do wish to ask your father

permission to marry Katala."

Kasumi's eyes narrowed. "Listen well, Pug. I tried to instruct you, but you did not seem to catch my meaning. You are not of a subtle people.

Now I will put it plainly. You may ask, but it will be refused."

Pug began to object, but Kasumi cut him off. "I have said, you are impatient people. There are reasons. More I cannot say, but there are reasons, Pug."

Anger flared in Pug's eyes, and Kasumi said, in the King's Tongue, "Say a word in anger within earshot of any soldier of this house, especially my brother, and you are a dead slave."

Stiffly Pug said, "Your will, master."

Witnessing the bitterness of Pug's expression, Kasumi softly repeated, "There are reasons, Pug." for a moment he was trying to be other than a Tsurani master, a friend trying to ease pain. He locked gaze with Pug, then a veil dropped over Kasumi's eyes, and once more they were slave and master.

Pug lowered his eyes as was expected of a slave, and Kasumi said, "See to the horses." He strode away, leaving Pug alone.

Pug NEVER SPOKE of his request to Katala. She sensed that something troubled him deeply, something that seemed to add a bitter note to their otherwise joyful time together. He learned the depth of his love for her and began to explore her complex nature. Besides being strong willed, she was quick-minded. He only had to explain something to her once, and she understood. He learned to love her dry wit, a quality native to her people, the Thuril, and sharpened to a razor's edge by her captivity. She was an observant student of everything around her and commented unmercifully upon the foibles of everyone in the household, to their detriment and Pug's amusement. She insisted upon learning some of Pug's language, so he began teaching her the King's Tongue. She proved an apt student.

Two months went by uneventfully, then one night Pug and Laurie were called to the dining room of the master of the house. Laurie had completed work upon his lute and, though dissatisfied in a hundred little ways, judged it passable for playing. Tonight he was to play for the Lord of the Shinzawai.

They entered the room and saw that the lord was entertaining a guest, a black-robed man, the Great One whom they had glimpsed months ago.

Pug stood by the door while Laurie took a place at the foot of the low dining table. Adjusting the cushion he sat upon, he began to play.

As the first notes hung in the air, he started singing: an old tune

that Pug knew well. It sang of the joys of harvest and the riches of the land, and was a favorite in farm villages throughout the Kingdom.

Besides Pug, only Kasumi understood the words, though his father could pick out a few that he had learned during his chess matches with Pug.

Pug had never heard Laurie sing before, and he was genuinely impressed. For all the troubadour's braggadocio, he was better than any Pug had heard. His voice was a clear, true instrument, expressive in both words and music of what he sang. When he was finished, the diners politely struck the table with eating knives, in what Pug assumed was the Tsurani equivalent of applause.

Laurie began another tune, a merry air played at festivals throughout the Kingdom. Pug remembered when he had last heard it, at the Festival of Banapis the year before he had left Crydee for Rillanon.

He could almost see once more the familiar sights of home. For the first time in years, Pug felt a deep sadness and longing that nearly overwhelmed him.

Pug swallowed hard, easing the tightness in his throat. Homesickness and hopeless frustration warred within him, and he could feel his hardlearned selfcontrol slipping away. He quickly invoked one of the calming exercises he had been taught by Kulgan. A sense of well-being swept over him, and he relaxed. While Laurie performed, Pug used all his concentration to fend off the haunting memories of home. All his skills created an aura of calm he could stand within, a refuge from useless rage, the only legacy of reminiscence.

Several times during the performance, Pug felt the gaze of the Great One upon him. The man seemed to study him with some question in his eyes. When Laurie was finished, the magician leaned over and spoke to his host.

The Lord of the Shinzawai beckoned Pug to the table. When he was seated, the Great One spoke. "I must ask you something." His voice was clear and strong, and his tone reminded Pug of Kulgan when he was preparing Pug for lessons. "Who are you?" The direct, simple question caught everyone at the table by surprise.

The lord of the house seemed uncertain as to the magician's question and started to reply. "He is a slave-" He was interrupted by the Great One's upraised hand. Pug said, "I am called Pug, master."

Again the man's dark eyes studied him. "Who are you?" Pug felt flustered. He had never liked being the center of attention, and this time it was focused upon him as never before in his life.

"I am Pug, once of the Duke of Crydee's court."

"who are you, to stand here radiating the power?" At this all three men of the Shinzawai household started, and Laurie looked at Pug in confusion.

"I am a slave, master." "Give me your hand."

Pug reached out, and his hand was taken by the Great One. The man's lips moved, and his eyes clouded over. Pug felt a warmth through his hand and over him. The room seemed to glow with a soft white haze. Soon all he could see was the magician's eyes. His mind fogged over, and time was suspended. He felt a pressure inside his head as if something were trying to intrude. He fought against it, and the pressure withdrew.

His vision cleared, and the two dark eyes seemed to withdraw from his face until he could see the entire room again. The magician let go of his hand. "who are you?" A brief flicker in his eyes was the only sign of his deep concern.

"I am Pug, apprentice to the magician Kulgan."

At this the Lord of the Shinzawai blanched, confusion registering his face. "How . . ."

The black-robed Great One rose and announced, "This slave is no longer property of this house. He is now the province of the Assembly."

The room fell silent. Pug couldn't understand what was happening and felt afraid.

The magician drew forth a device from his robe. Pug remembered that he had seen one before, during the raid on the Tsurani camp, and his fear mounted. The magician activated it, and it buzzed as the other one had. He placed his hand on Pug's shoulder, and the room disappeared in a grey haze.

21

Changeling

The elf prince sat quietly.

Calin awaited his mother. There was much on his mind, and he needed to speak with her this night. There had been little chance for that of late, for as the war had grown in scope, he found less time to abide in the bowers of Elvandar. As Warleader of the elves, he had been in the field nearly every day since the last time the outworlders had tried to

forge across the river.

Since the siege of Castle Crydee three years before, the outworlders had come each spring, swarming across the river like ants, a dozen for each elf. Each year elven magic had defeated them. Hundreds would enter the sleeping glades to fall into the endless sleep, their bodies being consumed by the soil, to nourish the magic trees. Others would answer the dryads' call, following the enchanted sprites' songs until in their passion for the elemental beings they would die of thirst while still in their inhuman lovers' embrace feeding the dryads with their lives.

Others would fall to the creatures of the forests, the giant wolves, bears, and lions who answered the call of the elven war horns. The very branches and roots of the trees of the elven forests would resist the invaders until they turned and fled.

But this year, for the first time, the Black Robes had come. Much of the elven magic had been blunted. The elves had prevailed, but Calin wondered how they would fare when the outworlders returned.

This year the dwarves of the Grey Towers had again aided the elves. With the moreldhel gone from the Green Heart, the dwarves had made swift passage from their wintering in the mountains, adding their numbers to the defense of Elvandar. For the third year since the siege at Crydee, the dwarves had proved the difference in holding the outworlders across the river. And again with the dwarves came the man called Tomas.

Calin looked up, then rose as his mother approached. Queen Aglaranna seated herself upon her throne and said, "My son, it is good to see you again."

"Mother, it is good to see you also." He sat at her feet and waited for the words he needed to come. His mother sat patiently, sensing his dark mood.

Finally he spoke. "I am troubled by Tomas."

"As am I," said the Queen, her expression clouded and pensive.

"Is that why you absent yourself when he comes to court?"  
"for that . . . and other reasons."

"How can it be the Old Ones' magic still holds so strong after all these ages?"

A voice came from behind the throne. "So that's it, then?"

They turned, surprised, and Dolgan stepped from the gloom, lighting his pipe. Aglaranna looked incensed. "Are the dwarves of the Grey Towers known for eavesdropping, Dolgan?"

The dwarven chief ignored the bite of the question. "Usually not, my lady. But I was out for a walk-those little tree rooms fill with smoke right quickly-and I happened to overhear. I did not wish to interrupt."

Calin said, "You can move with stealth when you choose, friend Dolgan." Dolgan shrugged and blew a cloud of smoke. "Elvenfolk are not the only ones with the knack of treading lightly. But we were speaking of the lad. If what you say is true, then it is a serious matter indeed. Had I known, I would never have allowed him to take the gift."

The queen smiled at him. "It is not your fault, Dolgan. You could not have known. I have feared this since Tomas came among us in the mantle of the Old Ones. At first I thought the magic of the Valheru would not work for him, being a mortal, but now I can see he is less mortal each year.

"It was an unfortunate series of events brought this to pass. Our spellweavers would have discovered that treasure ages ago, but for the dragon's magic. We spent centuries seeking out and destroying such relics, preventing their use by the moredhel. Now it is too late, for Tomas would never willingly let the armor be destroyed."

Dolgan puffed at his pipe. "Each winter he broods in the long halls, awaiting the coming of spring, and the coming of battle. There is little else for him. He sits and drinks, or stands at the door staring out into the snow, seeing what no other can see. He keeps the armor locked away in his room during such times, and when campaigning, he never removes it, even to sleep. He has changed, and it is not a natural changing. No, he would never willingly give up the armor."

"We could try to force him," said the queen, "but that could prove unwise. There is something coming into being in him, something that may save my people, and I would risk much for them."

Dolgan said, "I do not understand, my lady."

"I am not sure I do either, Dolgan, but I am Queen of a people at war. A terrible foe savages our lands and each year grows bolder. The outworld magic is strong, perhaps stronger than any since the Old Ones vanished. It may be the magic in the dragon's gift will save my people."

Dolgan shook his head. "It seems strange such power could still reside in metal armor."

Aglaranna smiled at the dwarf. "Does it? What of the Hammer of Tholin you carry? Is it not vested with powers from ages past? Powers that mark you once more heir to the throne of the dwarves of the West?"

Dolgan looked hard at the queen. "You know much of our ways, lady. I must never forget your girlish countenance masks ages of knowledge."

He then brushed away her comment. "We have been done with kings for many years in the West, since Tholin vanished in the Mac Mordain Cadal. We do as well as those who obey old King Halfdan in Dorgin. But should my people wish the throne restored, we shall meet in moot, though not until this war is over. Now, what of the lad?" Aglaranna looked troubled. "He is becoming what he is becoming. We can aid that transformation. Our Spellweavers work to this end already. Should the full power of the Valheru rise up in Tomas untempered, he would be able to brush aside our protective magic much as you would a bothersome twig barring your way upon the trail. But he is not an Old One born. His nature is as alien to the Valheru as their nature was to all others. Aided by our spellweavers, his human ability to love, to know compassion, to understand, may temper the unchecked power of the Valheru. If so, he may . . . he may prove a boon to us all." Dolgan was visited by the certainty the queen had been about to say something else, but remained silent as she continued. "Should that Valheru power become coupled with a human's capacity for blind hatred, savagery, and cruelty, then he would become something to fear. Only time will tell us what such a blending will produce."

"The Dragon Lords . . .," said Dolgan. "We have some mention of the Valheru in our lore, but only scraps here and there. I would understand more, if you'll permit."

The queen looked off into the distance. "Our lore, eldest of all in the world today, tells of the Valheru, Dolgan. There is much of which I am forbidden to speak, names of power<sup>F</sup> fearful to invoke, things terrible to recall, but I may tell you this much. Long before man or dwarf came to this world, the Valheru ruled. They were part of this world, fashioned from the very fabric of its creation, nearly godlike in power and unfathomable in purpose. Their nature was chaotic and unpredictable.

They were more POWERFUL than any others. Upon the backs of the great dragons they flew, no place in the universe beyond their reach. To other worlds they roamed, bringing back that which pleased them, treasure and knowledge plundered from other beings. They were subject to no law but their own will and whim. They fought among themselves as often as not, and only death resolved conflicts. This world was their dominion. And we were their creatures.

"We and the *moredhel* were of one race then, and the Valheru bred us as you would cattle. Some were taken, from both races, for . . .

personal pets, bred for beauty . . . and other qualities. Others were bred to tend the forests and fields. Those who lived in the wild

became the forerunners of the elves, while those who remained with the Malheru were the forerunners of the moredhel.

"But then came a time of changing. Our masters ceased their internecine struggles and banded together. Why they did so is forgotten, though some among the moredhel may still know, for they were closer to our masters than we elves. We may have known their reasons then, but this was the time of the Chaos Wars, and much was lost. Only this we know: all the servants of the Valheru were given freedom, and the Old Ones were never again seen by elf or moredhel. When the Chaos Wars raged, great rifts in time and space were opened, and it was through these that goblins, men, and dwarves came to this world. Few of our people or of the moredhel survived, but those that did rebuilt our homes. The moredhel longed to inherit the might of their lost masters, rather than seek their own destiny as the elves did, and used their cunning to find tokens of the Valheru, taking to the Dark Path. It is the reason we are so unlike, who once were brothers.

"The old magic is still powerful. In strength and bravery Tomas matches any. He took the magic unwittingly, and that may prove the difference. The old magic changed the moredhel into the Brotherhood of the Dark Path because they sought the power out of dark longings.

Tomas was a boy of good and noble heart, with no taint of evil in his soul. Perchance he will grow to master the dark side of the power.' Dolgan scratched his head. " 'Tis a grave risk, then, from what you say. I was concerned for the lad, true, and gave little thought to the larger scheme of things. You know the way of it better than I, but I hope we will not live to regret letting him keep the armor.

The Queen stepped down from her throne. "I also hope there will be no regrets, Dolgan. Here in Elvandar the old magic is softened, and Tomas is of lighter heart. Perhaps that is a sign we do the right thing, tempering the change rather than opposing it."

Dolgan made a courtly bow. "I yield to your wisdom, my lady. And I pray you are right."

The Queen bade them good night and left. Calin said, "I also pray my Mother-Queen speaks from wisdom, and not from some other feeling.

"I don't take your meaning, Elf Prince."

Calin looked down upon the short figure. "Don't play the fool with me, Dolgan. Your wisdom is widely known and highly respected. You see it as well as I. Between my mother and Tomas there is something growing."

Dolgan sighed, the freshening breeze carrying away his pipe's smoke.

"Aye, Calin, I've seen it as well. A look, little more, but enough."

"She looks upon Tomas as she once looked upon my Father-King, though she still denies it within herself."

"And there is something within Tomas," said the dwarf, watching the Elf Prince closely, "though it is less tender than what your lady feels.



Still, he holds it well in check."

"Look to your friend, Dolgan. Should he try to press his suit for the Queen, there will be trouble."

"So much do you dislike him, Calin?"

Calin looked thoughtfully at Dolgan. "No, Dolgan. I do not dislike Tomas. I fear him. That is enough." Calin was silent for a while, then said, "We will never again bend knee before another master, we who live in Elvandar. Should my mother's hopes of how Tomas will change prove false, we shall have a reckoning."

Dolgan shook his head slowly. "That would prove a sorry day, Calin."

"That it would, Dolgan." Calin walked from the council ring, past his mother's throne, and left the dwarf alone.

Dolgan looked out at the fairy lights of Elvandar, praying the Elf Queen's hopes would not prove unfounded.

WINDs hoWLED across the plains. Ashen-Shugar sat astride the broad shoulders of Shuruga. The great golden dragon's thoughts reached his master. Do we hunt? There was hunger in the dragon's mind.

"No. We wait."

The Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches waited as the streaming moredhel made their way toward the rising city. Hundreds pulled great blocks of stone mined in quarries half a world away, dragging them toward the city on the plains. Many had died and many more would die, but that was unimportant. Or was it? Ashen-Shugar was troubled by this new and strange thought.

A roar from above sounded as another great dragon came spiraling down, a magnificent black bellowing challenge. Shuruga raised his head and trumpeted his reply. To his master he said, Do we fight.? "No."

Ashen-Shugar sensed disappointment in his mount, but chose to ignore it. He watched as the other dragon settled gracefully to the ground a short distance away, folding its mighty wings across its back. Black scales reflected the hazy sunlight like polished ebony. The dragon's rider raised his hand in salute.

Ashen-Shugar returned the greeting, and the other's dragon approached cautiously. Shuruga hissed, and Ashen-Shugar absently struck the beast with his fist. Shuruga lapsed into silence.

"Has the Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches finally come to join us?"

asked the newcomer, Draken-Korin, the Lord of Tigers. His

black-and-orange-striped armor sparkled as he dismounted from his dragon.

Out of courtesy Ashen-Shugar dismounted as well. His hand never strayed far from his white-hilted sword of gold, for though times were changing, trust was unknown among the Valheru. In times past they would have fought as likely as not, but now the need for information was more pressing. Ashen-Shugar said, "No. I simply watch."

Draken-Korin regarded the Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches, his pale blue eyes revealing no emotion. "You alone have not agreed, Ashen-Shugar." "Joining to plunder across the cosmos is one thing, Draken-Korin.

This . . . this plan of yours is madness."

"what is this madness? I know not of what you speak. We are. We do. what more is there?"

"This is not our way."

"It is not our way to let others stand against our will. These new beings, they contest with us."

Ashen-Shugar raised his eyes skyward. "Yes, that is so. But they are not like others. They also are formed from the very stuff of this world, as are we."

"What does that matter? How many of our kin have you killed? How much blood has passed your lips? Whoever stands against you must be killed, or kill you. That is all."

"what of those left behind, the moredhel and the elves?"

"What of them? They are nothing."

"They are ours."

"You have grown strange under your mountains, Ashen-Shugar. They are our servants. It is not as if they possessed true power. They exist for our pleasure, nothing more. What concerns you?"

"I do not know. There is something. . . ."

"ToMAS."

for an instant Tomas existed in two places. He shook his head and the visions vanished. He turned his head and saw Galain lying in the brush next to him. A force of elves and dwarves waited some distance behind. The young cousin of Prince Calin pointed toward the Tsurani

camp across the river. Tomas followed his companion's gesture and saw the outworld soldiers sitting near their campfires, and smiled. "They hug their camps," he whispered.

Galain nodded. "We have stung them enough that they seek the warmth of their campfires."

The late spring evening mist shrouded the area, mantling the Tsurani camp in haze. Even the campfires seemed to burn less brightly. Tomas again studied the camp. "I mark thirty, with thirty more in each camp east and west."

Galain said nothing, waiting for Tomas's next' command. Though Galin was Warleader of Elvandar, Tomas had assumed command of the forces of elves and dwarves. It was never clear when captaincy had passed to him, but slowly, as he had grown in stature, he had grown in leadership. In battle he would simply shout for something to be done, and elves and dwarves would rush to obey. At first it had been because the commands were logical and obvious. But the pattern had become accepted, and now they obeyed because it was Tomas who commanded.

Tomas motioned for Galain to follow and moved away from the riverbank, until they were safely out of sight of the Tsurani camp, among those who waited deep within the trees. Dolgan looked at the young man who once had been the boy he saved from the mines of Mac Mordain Cadal.

Tomas stood six inches past six feet in height, as tall as any elf.

He walked with a powerful self-assurance, a warrior born. In the six years he had been with the dwarves, he had become a man . . . and more.

Dolgan watched him, as Tomas surveyed the warriors gathered before him, and knew Tomas could now walk the dark mines of the Grey Towers without fear or danger.

"Have the other scouts returned?"

Dolgan nodded, signaling for them to come forward. Three elves and three dwarves approached. "Any sign of the Black Robes?"

when the scouts indicated no, the man in white and gold frowned.

"We would do well to capture one of them and carry him to Elvandar.

Their last attack was the deepest yet. I would give much to know the limits of their power."

Dolgan took out his pipe, gauging they were far enough from the river for it not to be seen. As he lit it, he said, "The Tsurani guard the Black Robes like a dragon guards its treasure."

Tomas laughed at that, and Dolgan caught a glimpse of the boy he had known. "Aye, and it's a brave dwarf who loots a dragon's lair."

Galain said, "If they follow the pattern of the last three years, they most likely are done with us for the season. It is possible we shall not see another Black Robe until next spring."

Tomas looked thoughtful, his pale eyes seemingly aglow with a light of their own. "Their pattern . . . their pattern is to take, to hold, then to take more. We have been willing to let them do as they wish, so long as they do not cross the river. It is time to change that pattern. And if we trouble them enough, we may have the opportunity to seize one of these Black Robes."

Dolgan shook his head at the risk implicit in what Tomas proposed.

Then, with a smile, Tomas added, "Besides, if we can't loosen their hold along the river for a time, the dwarves and I will be forced to winter here, for the outworlders are now deep into the Green Heart."

Galain looked at his tall friend. Tomas grew more elf-like each year, and Galain could appreciate the obscure humor that often marked his words. He knew Tomas would welcome staying near the Queen. But in spite of his worries over Tomas's magic, he had come to like the man.

"How?"

"Send bowmen to the camps on the right and the left and beyond.

when I call with the honk of a greylag, have them volley across the river, but from beyond those positions as if the main attack were coming from east and west." He smiled, and there was no humor in his expression. "That should isolate this camp long enough for us to do some bloody work."

Galain nodded, and sent ten bowmen to each camp. The others made ready for the attack, and after sufficient time Tomas raised his hands

to his mouth. Cupping them, he made the sound of a wild goose. a moment later he could hear shouting coming from east and west of the position across the river. The soldiers in the Tsurani camp stood and looked both ways, with several coming to the edge of the water, peering into the dark forest. Tomas raised his hand and dropped it with a chopping motion.

Suddenly it was raining elven arrows on the camp across the river, and Tsurani soldiers were diving for their shields. Before they could fully arm, Tomas led a charge of dwarves across the shallow sandbar ford.

another flight of arrows passed overhead, then the elves shouldered their bows, drew swords, and charged after the dwarves, all save a dozen who would stay to offer covering fire should it be needed. Tomas was first ashore and struck down a Tsurani guard who met him on the river's edge. Quickly he was among them, wreaking mayhem.

Tsurani blood exploded off his golden blade, and the screams of wounded and dying men filled the damp night.

Dolgan slew a guard and found none to stand against him. He turned and saw Galain standing over another dead Tsurani, but staring at something beyond. The dwarf followed his gaze to where Tomas was standing over a wounded Tsurani soldier who lay with blood running down his face from a scalp wound, an arm upraised in a plea for mercy.

Over him stood Tomas, his face an alien mask of rage. With a strange and terrible cry, in a voice rough and harsh, he brought down his golden sword and ended the Tsurani's life. He turned quickly, seeking more foes. when none presented themselves, he seemed to go blank for a moment, then his eyes refocused.

Galain heard a dwarf call, "They come." Shouts came from the other Tsurani camps as they discovered the ruse and quickly approached the true battle site.

Without a word Tomas's party hurried across the water. They reached the other side as Tsurani bowmen fired upon them, to be answered by elves on the opposite shore. The attacking group quickly fell back deeply into the trees, until they were a safe distance away.

When they stopped, the elves and dwarves sat down to catch their wind, and to rest from the battle surge still in their blood. Galain looked to Tomas and said, "We did well. No one lost, and only a few slightly wounded, and thirty outworlders slain."

Tomas didn't smile, but looked thoughtfully for a moment, as if hearing something. He turned to look at Galain, as if the elf's words were finally registering. "Aye, we did well, but we must strike again, tomorrow and the next day and the next, until they act."

Night after night they crossed the river. They would attack a camp, and the next night strike miles away. A night would pass without attack, then the same camp would be raided three nights running. Sometimes a single arrow would take a guard from the opposite shore, then nothing, while his companions stood waiting for an attack that never came.

Once they struck through the lines at dawn, after the defenders had decided that no attack was coming. They overran a camp, ranging miles into the south forest, and took a baggage train, even slaughtering the strange six-legged beasts who pulled the wagons. Five separate fights were fought as they returned from that raid, and two dwarves and three elves were lost.

Now Tomas and his band, numbering over three hundred elves and dwarves, sat awaiting word from other camps. They were eating a stew of venison, seasoned with mosses, roots, and tubers.

A runner came up to Tomas and Galain. "Word from the King's army."

Behind him a figure in grey approached the campfire.

Tomas and Galain stood. "Hail, Long Leon of Natal," said the elf.

"Hail, Galain," answered the tall, black-skinned ranger.

An elf brought over bread and a bowl of steaming stew to the two newcomers, and as they sat, Tomas said, "what news from the Duke?"

Between mouthfuls of food, the ranger said, "Lord Borric sends greetings. Things stand poorly. Like moss on a tree, the Tsurani slowly advance in the east. They take a few yards, then sit. They seem to be in no hurry. The Duke's best guess is they seek to reach the coast by next year, isolating the Free Cities from the north. Then perhaps an attack toward ZUn or LaMut. who can say?"

Tomas asked, "Any news from Crydee?"

"Pigeons arrived just before I left. Prince Arutha holds fast against the Tsurani. They have luck as poor there as here. But they move southward through the Green Heart." He surveyed the dwarves and Tomas.

"I am surprised that you could reach Elvandar."

Dolgan puffed his pipe. "It was a long trek. We had to move swiftly and with stealth. It is unlikely we will be able to return to the mountains now the invaders are aroused. Once in place, they are loath to yield what they have gained."

Tomas paced before the fire. "How did you elude their sentries?"  
"Your raids are causing much confusion in their ranks. Men who faced the Armies of the West were pulled out of the line to rush to the river. I simply followed one such group. They never thought to look behind. I had only to slip past their lines when they withdrew and then again across the river."

Calin said, "How many do they bring against us?"

Leon shrugged. "I saw six companies, there must be others." They had estimated a Tsurani company at twenty squads each of thirty men.

Tomas slapped his gloved hands together. "They would bring three thousand men back only if they were planning another crossing. They must seek to drive us deep into the forest again, to keep us from harrying their positions." He crossed to stand over the ranger. "Do any of the black-robed ones come?"

"From time to time I saw one with the company I followed."

Tomas again slapped his hands. "This time they come in force. Send word to the other camps. In two days' time all the host of Elvandar is to meet at the queen's court, save scouts and runners who will watch the outworlders."

Silently runners sprang up from the fire and hurried off to carry word to the other elven bands strung out along the banks of the river Crydee.

AsHEN-SHUGAR SAT upon his throne, oblivious to the dancers. The moredhel females had been chosen for their beauty and grace, but he was untouched by their allure. His mind's eye was far away, seeking the coming battle. Inside, a strangeness, a hollow feeling without name, came into being.

It is called sadness, said the voice within.

Ashen-Shugar thought: who are you to visit me in my solitude?

I am that which you are becoming. This is but a dream, a memory.

Ashen-Shugar drew forth his sword and rose from his throne, bellowing his rage. Instantly the musicians stopped their playing. The dancers, servants, and musicians fell to the floor, prostrating themselves before their master. "I am! There is no dream!"

You are but a remembrance of the past, said the voice. We are becoming one.

Ashen-Shugar raised his sword, then lashed down. The head of a cowering servant rolled upon the floor. Ashen-Shugar knelt and placed his hand in the fountain of blood. Raising fingers to his lips, he tasted the salty flavor and cried, "Is this not the taste of life!"

It is illusion. All has passed.

"I feel a strangeness, an unease that makes me . . . it makes me there is no word."

"It is fear.

Ashen-Shugar again lashed out with his sword, and a young dancer died. "These things, they know fear. what has fear to do with .

me?"

You are afraid. All creatures fear change, even the gods.

who are you? asked the Valheru silently.

I am you. I am what you will become. I am what you were. I am Tomas.

A sound from below brought Tomas from his reverie. He rose and left his small room, crossing a tree-branch bridge to the level of the queen's court. At a rail he could make out the dim figures of hundreds of dwarves camped below the heights of Elvandar. He stood for a time watching the campfires below. Each hour hundreds more elven and dwarven warriors made their way to join this army he marshaled. Tomorrow he would sit in council with Calin, Tathar, Dolgan, and others and make known his plan to meet the coming assault.



Six years of fighting had given Tomas a strange counterpoint to the dreams that still troubled his sleep. when the battle rage took him, he existed in another's dreams. When he was away from the elven forest, the call to enter those dreams became ever more difficult to stem. He felt no fear of these visitations, as he had at first. He was more than human because of some long-dead being's dreams. There were powers within him, powers that he could use, and they were now part of him, as they had been part of the wearer of the white and gold. He knew that he would never be Tomas of Crydee again, but what was he becoming?

The slightest hint of a footfall sounded behind him. Without turning, he said, "Good eve, my lady."

The Elf queen came to stand next to him, a studied expression on her face. "Your senses are elven now," she said in her own language.

"So it seems, Shining Moon," he answered in the same language, ' using the ancient translation of her name.

He turned to face her and saw wonder in her eyes. She reached out and gently touched his face. "Is this the boy who stood so flustered in the Duke's council chamber at the thought of speaking before the Elf Queen, who now speaks the true tongue as if born to it?"

He pushed away her hand, gently. "I am what I am, what you see."

His voice was firm, commanding.

She studied his face, holding back a shudder as she recognized something fearful within his countenance. "But what do I see, Tomas?"

Ignoring her question, he said, "why do you avoid me, lady?"

Gently she spoke. "There is this thing growing between us that may not be. It sprang into existence the moment you first came to us, Tomas."

Almost with a note of amusement, Tomas said, "Before that, lady, from the first I gazed upon you." He stood tall over her. "And why may this thing not be? Who better to sit at your side?"

She moved away from him, her control lost for a brief moment. In that instant he saw what few had ever seen: the Elf Queen confused and unsure, doubting her own ancient wisdom. "whatever else, you are man.

Despite what powers are granted you, it is a man's span allotted to you. I will reign until my spirit travels to the Blessed Isles to be with my lord, who has already made the journey. Then Calin rules, as son of a king, as King. Thus it is with my people."

Tomas reached for her and turned her to face him. "It was not always so."

Her eyes showed a spark of fear. "No, we were not always a free people." She sensed impatience within him, but she also saw him struggle with it as he forced his voice to calmness. "Do you then feel nothing?"

She took a step away. "I would lie if I said not. But it is a strange pulling, and something that fills me with uncertainty and with no small dread. If you become more the Valheru, more than the man can master, then we could not welcome you here. We would not allow the return of the Old Ones."

Tomas laughed, with a strange mixture of humor and bitterness. "As a boy I beheld you and was filled with a boy's longing. Now I am a man and behold you with a man's longing. Is the power that makes me bold enough to seek you out, the power that gives me the means to do so, that which will also keep us apart?"

Aglaranna put her hand to her cheek. "I know not. It has never been with the royal family to be other than what we are. Others may seek alliance with humans. I would not have that sadness when you are old and grey and I am still as you see me."

Tomas's eyes flashed, and his voice gained a harsh edge. "That will never happen, lady. I shall live a thousand years in this glade. Of that I have no doubt. But I shall trouble you no more . . . until other matters are settled. This thing is willed by fate to be, Aglaranna. You will come to know that."

She stood with her hand raised to her mouth, and her eyes moist with emotion. He walked away, leaving her alone in her court to consider what he had said. For the first time since her Lord-King had passed over, Aglaranna knew two conflicting emotions: fear and longing.

ToMAs TurMED at a shout from the edge of the clearing. An elf was walking from the trees followed by a simply dressed man. He stopped his conversation with Calin and Dolgan, and the three hurried to follow the stranger as he was guided up to the Queen's court. Aglaranna sat on her throne, her elders arranged on benches to either side. Tathar stood next to the queen.

The stranger approached the throne and made a slight bow. Tathar threw a quick glance at the sentry who had escorted the man, but the elf looked bemused. The man in brown said, "Greetings, lady," in

perfect elvish.

Aglaranna answered in the King's Tongue. "You come boldly among us, stranger."

The man smiled, leaning on his staff. "Still, I did seek a guide, for I would not enter Elvandar unbidden."

Tathar said, "I think yon guide had little choice."

The man said, "There is always a choice, though it is not always apparent."

Tomas stepped forward. "what is your purpose here?"

Turning at the voice, the man smiled. "Ah! The wearer of the dragon's gift. Well met, Tomas of Crydee."

Tomas stepped back. The man's eyes radiated power, and his easy manner veiled strength that Tomas could feel. "who are you?"

The man said, "I have many names, but here I am called Macros the Black." He pointed with his staff and swept it around the gathered watchers. "I have come, for you have embarked upon a bold plan." At the last, he pointed his staff at Tomas. He dropped the tip and leaned on the staff again. "But the plan to capture a Black Robe will bring naught but destruction to Elvandar should you not have my aid." He smiled slightly. "A' Black Robe you shall have in time, but not yet."

There was a hint of irony in his voice.

Aglaranna arose. Her shoulders were back, and her eyes looked straight into his. "You know much."

Macros inclined his head slightly. "Aye, I know much, more than is sometimes comforting." He stepped past her and placed a hand upon Tomas's shoulder. Guiding Tomas to a seat near where the Queen stood, Macros forced him to sit with a gentle pressure on his shoulder.

He took a seat next to him and laid the staff against the crook of his neck and shoulder. Looking at the Queen, he said, "The Tsurani come at first light, and they will drive straight through to Elvandar."

Tathar stepped before Macros and said, "How do you know this?"

Macros smiled again. "Do you not remember me in council with your father?"

Tathar stepped back, his eyes widening. "You . . ."

"I am he, though I am no longer called as I was then."

Tathar looked troubled. "So long ago. I would not have thought it possible."

Macros said, "Much is possible." He looked pointedly from the Queen to Tomas.

Aglaranna slowly sat down, masking her discomfort. "Are you the sorcerer?"

Macros nodded. "So I am called, though there is more in the tale than can be told now. Will you heed me?"

Tathar nodded to the Queen. "Long ago, this one came to our aid. I do not understand how it can be the same man, but he was then a true friend to your father and mine. He can be trusted."

"what, then, is your counsel?" asked the queen.

"The Tsurani magicians have marked your sentries, knowing where they hide. At first light they will come, breaking across the river in two waves, like the horns of a bull. As you meet them, a wave of the creatures called cho-ja will come through the center, where your strength is weak. They have not thrown them against you yet, but the dwarves can tell you of their skill in warfare."

Dolgan stepped forward. "Aye, lady. They are fearsome creatures and fight in the dark as well as do my people. I had thought them confined to the mines."

Macros said, "And so they were, until the raids. They have brought up a host of them, which ready themselves across the river, beyond the sight of your scouts. They will come in numbers. The Tsurani tire of your raids and would put an end to the warring across the river. Their magicians have worked hard to learn the secrets of Elvandar, and now they know that should the sacred heart of the elven forests fall, the elves will be a force no longer."

Tomas said, "Then we shall hold back, and defend against the center."

Macros sat quietly for a moment, as if remembering something.

"That is a start, but they bring their magicians with them, anxious as they are for an ending. Their magic will let their warriors pass through your forests unchecked by the power of your spellweavers, and here they will come."

Aglaranna said, "Then we shall meet them here and stand until the end."

Macros nodded. "Bravely said, lady, but you will need my aid." .

Dolgan studied the sorcerer. "what can one man do?"

Macros stood. "Much. Upon the morrow, you shall see. Fear not, dwarf, the battle will be harsh, and many will travel to the Blessed Isles, but with firm resolve, we shall prevail."

Tomas said, "You speak like one who has already seen these things happen."

Macros smiled, and his eyes said a thousand things, and nothing. "I do, Tomas of Crydee, do I not?" He turned to the others and with a sweep of his staff said, "Ready yourselves. I shall be with you." To the Queen he said, "I would rest, if you have a place for me?"

The queen turned to the elf who had brought Macros to the council.

"Take him to a room, bring him whatever he requires."  
The sorcerer bowed and followed the guide.

The others stood in silence, until Tomas said, "Let us make ready."

As NIGHT GAVE way to dawn, the queen stood alone near her throne. In all the years of her rule, she had never known a time like this. Her thoughts ran with hundreds of images, from times as long ago as her youth, and as recently as two nights ago.

"Seeking answers in the past, lady?"

She turned to see the sorcerer standing behind her, leaning on his staff. He approached and stood next to her.

"Can you read my mind, sorcerer?"

With a smile and a wave of his hand, Macros said, "No, my lady. But there is much I do know and can see. Your heart is heavy, and your mind burdened."

"Do you understand why?"

Macros laughed softly. "Without question. Still, I would speak to you of these things." "Why, sorcerer? what part do you play?"

Macros looked out over the lights of Elvandar. "A part, much as any man plays."

"But you know yours well."

"True. It is given to some to understand what is obscure to others.

Such is my fate."

"Why have you come?"

"Because there is need. Without me Elvandar may fall, and that must not be. It is so ordained, and I can only do my part." "Will you stay if the battle is won?"

"No. I have other tasks. But I will come once more, when the need is again great."

"when?"

"That I may not tell you."

"Will it be soon?"

"Soon enough, though not soon enough."

"You speak in riddles."

Macros smiled, a crooked, sad smile. "Life is a riddle. It is in the hands of the gods. Their will shall prevail, and many mortals will find their lives changed."

"Tomas?" Aglaranna looked deep into the sorcerer's dark eyes.

"He most visibly, but all who live through these times."

"What is he?"

"What would you have him be?"

The Elf queen found herself unable to answer. Macros placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. She felt calm flow from his fingers and heard herself say, "I would wish nothing of trouble upon my people, but the sight of him fills me with longing. I long for a man . . . a man with his . . . might. Tomas is more like my lost lord than he will ever know.

And I fear him, for once I make the pledge, once I place him above me, I lose the power to rule. Do you think the elders would allow this? My people would never willingly place the yoke of the Valheru upon their necks again, The sorcerer was silent for a time, then said, "for all my arts, there are things hidden from me, but understand this: there is a magic here beyond imagining. I cannot explain save to say it reaches across time, more than is apparent.

for while the Valheru is present within Tomas now, so is Tomas present within the Valheru in ages past.

"Tomas wears the garb of Ashen-Shugar, last of the Dragon Lords.

When the Chaos Wars raged, he alone remained upon this world, for he felt things alien to his kind."

"Tomas?"

Macros smiled. "Think not upon this overly long, lady. These sorts of paradox can send the mind reeling. what Ashen-Shugar felt was an obligation to protect this world."

Aglaranna studied Macros's face in the twinkling lights of Elvandar.

You know more of the ancient lore than any other man, sorcerer."

"I have been . . . given much, lady." He looked over the elven forests and spoke more to himself than to the queen: "Soon will come a time of testing for Tomas. I cannot be sure what will occur, but this much I do know. Somehow the boy from Crydee, in his love for you and yours, in his simple human caring, has so far withstood the most powerful member of the most powerful mortal race ever to have lived upon this world. And he is well served in withstanding the terrible pain of ' that conflict of two natures by the soft arts of your Spellweavers."

She looked hard at Macros. "You know of this?"

He laughed with genuine amusement. "Lady, I am not without some vanity. I'm stung you'd think you could fashion so fine a spellweaving without my observing. Little magic in this world escapes my notice.

what you have done is wise and may tip the balance in Tomas's favor."

"That is the thought I plead to myself," said Aglaranna quietly, "when I see in Tomas a lord to match the King of my youth, the husband taken too soon from my side. Can it be true?"

"Should he survive the time of testing, yes. It may be the conflict will prove the end of both Tomas and Ashen-Shugar. But should Tomas survive, he may become what you most secretly long for.

"Now I shall tell you something only the gods and I know. I can judge many things yet to come, but much is still unknown to me. One thing I know is this: at your side Tomas may grow to rule wisely and well and, as his youth is replaced by wisdom, grow to be the lord of your wishes, if his power can somehow be tempered by his human heart. Should he be sent away, a terrible fate may await both the Kingdom and the free peoples of the West."

Her eyes asked the question, and he continued. "I cannot see that dark future, lady, I can only surmise. Should he come to his powers with the dark side in preeminence, he will be a threat, one that must be destroyed. Those who see the battle madness upon him see but a shadow of the true darkness bound up in him.



Even if a balance is struck and Tomas's humanity survives and you send him away, then humanity's capacity for anger, pain, and vengeance will come forth. I ask you: should Tomas be driven away and raise the dragon standard in the north, what would occur?"

The Queen became frightened and openly showed it, her control lost completely. "The moredhel would gather."

"Aye, my lady. Not as bands of troublesome bandits, but as a host.

Twenty thousand Dark Brothers, and with them a hundred thousand goblins, and companies of men whose dark nature would seek profit from the destruction and savagery to follow. A mighty army under the glove of a warrior born, a general whom even your own people follow without question."

"Do you advise me to keep him here?"

"I can only point out the alternatives. You must decide.

The Elf queen threw back her head, her red-gold locks flying and her eyes moist, looking out over Elvandar. The first light of day was breaking.

Rosy light lanced through the trees, casting shadows of deep blue.

The morning songs of birds could be heard around the glades. She turned to Macros, wishing to thank him for his counsel, and found him gone.

The Tsurani **ADVANCED** as Macros had foretold. The cho-ja attacked across the river, after the two human waves had carried the flanks.

Tomas had set skirmishers, lines of bowmen with a few shield guards, who retreated and fired into the advancing army, giving the impression of resistance.

Tomas stood before the assembled army of Elvandar and the dwarves of the Grey Towers, only fifteen hundred arrayed against the six thousand invaders and their magicians. In silence they waited. As the enemy approached, the shouts of Tsurani warriors and the cries of those who fell to elvish arrows could be heard through the forest. Tomas looked up at the queen, standing on a balcony overlooking the scene of the coming battle, next to the sorcerer.

Suddenly elves were running toward them, and the first flashes of the colored Tsurani armor could be seen through the trees. When the skirmishers had rejoined the main force, Tomas raised his sword.

"Wait," a voice cried out from above, and the sorcerer pointed across the open clearing, where the first elements of the Tsurani forces were running into the clearing. Confronted by the waiting elven army, the vanguard halted and waited as their comrades joined them. Their ranks formed, for here was fighting they could understand-two armies meeting on an open plain, and the advantage was theirs.

cho-ja also stood in ordered ranks, heeding the officers' shouted commands. Tomas was fascinated, for he still knew little of these creatures and counted them animals as much as intelligent allies of the Tsurani.

Macros shouted, "Wait!" again, and waved his staff above his head, inscribing broad circles in the air. A stillness descended upon the clearing.

suddenly an owl flew past Tomas's head, straight for the Tsurani lines. It circled above the aliens for a moment, then swooped and struck a soldier in the face. The man screamed in pain as its talons clawed his eyes.

It repeated the owl's attack. Then a large black bird descended from the sky. A flight of sparrows erupted from the trees behind the Tsurani and pecked at faces and unprotected arms. Birds were flying from every part of the forest and attacked the invaders. The air was filled with the sound of flapping wings as every manner of bird in the forest descended upon the Tsurani. Thousands of them, from the smallest hummingbird to the mighty eagle, attacked the outdirt. Men cried out, and a few broke formation and ran, trying to avoid the wicked beaks and talons that tried to scratch at eyes, pull at cloaks, and tear flesh. The cho-ja reared, for though their armored hide was immune to the pecking and clawing, their large, jewellike eyes were easy targets for the feathered attackers.

A shout went up from the elves as the Tsurani lines dissolved in disorder. Tomas gave the order, and elven bowmen added feathered arrows to the fray. Tsurani soldiers were struck and fell before they could come to grips with the enemy. Their own bowmen could not return the fire, for they were harried by a hundred tiny foes.

The elves watched as the Tsurani tried to hold position, while the birds continued their bloody work in their midst. The Tsurani fought back as best they could, striking down many birds in midflight, but for each one killed, three took its place.

Suddenly a hissing, tearing sound cut through the din. There was an instant of silence as everything moving on the Tsurani side of the clearing seemed to pause. Then the birds exploded upward, accompanied by a sizzling crackle of energy, as if thrown back by some unseen force. As the birds cleared the area, Tomas could see the black robes of the Tsurani magicians as they moved through their forces, restoring order. Hundreds of wounded Tsurani lay upon the ground, but the battletempered aliens quickly re-formed their lines, ignoring the injured.

The enormous flight of birds gathered again above the invaders and started to dive. Instantly a glowing red shield of energy formed around the Tsurani. As the birds struck, they stiffened and fell, their feathers smoldering and filling the air with a pungent burning stench. Elven arrows that struck the barrier were halted in midflight and burst into flame, falling harmlessly to the ground.

Tomas gave the order to stop the bow fire and turned to look at Macros. Again the sorcerer shouted, "Wait!"

Macros waved his staff and the birds dispersed, hearing his silent command. The staff extended toward the Tsurani, as Macros aimed it at the red barrier. A golden bolt of energy shot forth. It sped across the clearing and pierced the red barrier, to strike a black-robed magician in the chest. The magician crumpled to the ground, and a shout of horror and outrage went up from the assembled Tsurani. The other magicians turned their attention to the platform above the elven army, and blue globes of fire shot toward Macros. Tomas shouted, "Aglaranna!" in rage as the tiny blue stars struck the platform, obliterating all sight of her

in a blinding display of exploding light. Then he could see again. The sorcerer stood upon the platform unharmed, as did the Queen. Tathar pulled her away, and Macros pointed with his staff again. Another black-robed magician fell. The four remaining magicians looked upon Macros's survival and counterattack with expressions of mixed awe and anger, clearly seen across the glade. They redoubled their assault upon the sorcerer, wave after wave of blue light and fire striking Macros's protective barrier. All upon the ground were forced to turn away from the sight, lest they become blinded by the terrible energies being unleashed. After this magical onslaught was ended, Tomas looked upward, and again the sorcerer was unharmed.

One magician gave out with a cry of pure anguish and pulled a device from his robe. Activating it, he vanished from the clearing, followed moments later by his three companions. Macros looked down at Tomas, pointed his staff at the Tsurani host, and called, "Now!"

Tomas raised his sword and gave the signal to attack. A hail of arrows passed overhead as he led the charge across the clearing. The Tsurani were demoralized, their attack blunted by the birds and the sight of their magicians being killed and driven off. Yet they stood their ground and took the charge. Hundreds had died from the claws and beaks of the birds, and more from the flights of arrows, but still they numbered three to one of the elves and dwarves.

The battle was joined, and Tomas was caught up in the red haze that washed away any thought but to kill. Hacking right and left, he carved a path through the Tsurani, confounding their every attempt to strike him down. Tsurani and cho-ja both fell to his blade, as he delivered death with an even hand to all who stood before him.

Back and forth across the clearing the battle moved, as man and cho-ja, elf and dwarf fell. The sun moved higher in the sky, and there was no respite from the fray. The sounds of death filled the air, and high overhead the kites and vultures gathered.

Slowly the Tsurani press forced the elves and dwarves back. Slowly they moved toward the heart of Elvandar. There was a brief pause, as if both sides had struck a balance, when the adversaries moved away from each other, leaving an open space between. Tomas heard the voice of the sorcerer ringing clear above the sounds of battle. "Back!" it cried, and to a man, the forces of Elvandar retreated.

The Tsurani paused a moment, then, sensing the hesitation of the elves and dwarves to continue, started to press forward. Abruptly there came a rumbling sound, and the earth trembled. All stopped moving, and the Tsurani looked fearful.

Tomas could see the trees shake, more and more violently, as the trembling increased. Suddenly there came a crescendo of noise, as if the grandfather of all thunderclaps pealed overhead. With the booming sound, a huge piece of earth erupted upward, as if heaved by some invisible giant's hand. The Tsurani who were standing on it shot upward, to fall hard to the ground, and those nearby were knocked aside. Another piece of the ground erupted, then a third. Suddenly the air was full of giant pieces of earth that flew upward, then fell upon the Tsurani. Screams of terror filled the air, and the Tsurani turned and fled. There was no order to their retreat, for they flew from a place where the

very earth attacked them. Tomas watched as the clearing was emptied , of all but the dead and dying.

In a matter of minutes, the clearing was quiet, as the earth subsided and the shocked onlookers stood mute. The sounds of the Tsurani army retreating through the woods could be heard. Their cries told of other horrors being visited upon them as they fled.

Tomas felt weak and weary, and looked down to find his arms covered with blood. His tabard and shield and his golden sword were clean as they always were, but for the first time he could feel human life splattered upon himself. In Elvandar the battle madness did not stay with him, and he felt sick to his inner being.

He turned and said softly, "It is over." There was a faint cheer from the elves and dwarves, but it was halfhearted, for none felt like victors. They had seen a mighty host felled by primeval forces, elemental powers that defied description.

Tomas walked slowly past Calin and Dolgan and mounted the stairs.

The Elf Prince sent soldiers to follow the retreating invaders, to care for the allied wounded, and to give the dying Tsurani quick mercy.

Tomas made his way to the small room where he abided, and pulled aside the curtain. He sat heavily upon his pallet, tossing aside his sword and shield. A dull throbbing in his head caused him to close his eyes. Memories came flooding in.

THE HEhVENs wERE torn with mad vortices of energy crashing from horizon to horizon. Ashen-Shugar sat upon mighty Shuruga's back, watching the very fabric of time and space rent.

A clarion rang, the heralding note heard by dint of his magic. The moment he awaited had come. Urging Shuruga upward, Ashen-Shugars eyes searched the heavens, seeking what must come against the display in the skies. A sudden stiffening of Shuruga under him coincided with his sighting of his prey. The figure of Draken-Korin was recognizable as he sat upon his black dragon. There was a strangeness in his eyes, and for the first time in his long memory Ashen-Shugar began to understand the meaning of horror. He could not put a name to it, could not describe it, but in the tortured eyes of Draken-Korin he saw it

Ashen-Shugar ordered Shuruga forward. The mighty golden dragon roared his challenge, answered by Draken-Korin's equally mighty black. The two clashed in the sky, and their riders worked their arts upon each other.

Ashen-Shugar's golden blade arched overhead and struck, cleaving the black shield with the grinning tiger's head in twain. It was almost too easy, as Ashen-Shugar had known it would be. Draken-Korin had given up too much of his essence to that which was forming. Before the might of the last Valheru, he was little more than a mortal. Once, twice, three times more Ashen-Shugar struck, and the last of his brothers fell from the back of his black dragon. Downward he tumbled to strike the ground. By force of will, Ashen-Shugar left Shuruga's back and floated to stand beside the helpless body of Draken-Korin, leaving Shuruga to finish his contest with the near-dead black dragon.

A spark of life still persisted within the broken form, life ages past remembering. A pleading look entered Draken-Korin's eyes as Ashen-Shugar approached. He whispered, "Why?"

Pointing heavenward with his golden blade, Ashen-Shugar said, "This obscenity should never have been allowed. You bring an end to all we knew."

Draken-Korin looked skyward to where Ashen-Shugar pointed. He watched the tumbling, raging display of energies, twisted, screaming rainbows of light jagged across the vault of the sky. He witnessed the new horror being formed from the twisted life force of his brothers and sisters, a raging, mindless thing of hate and anger.

In a croaking voice, Draken-Korin said, "They were so strong. We could never have dreamed." His face contorted in terror and hate as Ashen-Shugar raised his golden blade. "But I had the right!" he screamed.

Ashen-Shugar brought down his blade, cleanly severing the head of Draken-Korin from his body. At once both head and body were engulfed with a glimmering light, and the air hissed around Ashen-Shugar. Then the fallen Valheru vanished without trace, his essence returning to that mindless monster raging against the new gods. With bitterness Ashen-Shugar said, "There is no right. There is only power."

Is that how it was?

'yes, that is how I slew the last of my brethren."

The others?

"They are now part of that." He indicated the terrible sky.

Together, never apart, they watched the madness above as the Chaos Wars raged. After a time Ashen-Shugar said, "Come, this is an ending. Let us be done with it."

They began to walk toward the waiting Shuruga. Then a voice came.

.YOU ARE QUIET.,

Tomas opened his eyes. Before him knelt Aglaranna, a basin of herbsweetened water and a cloth in her hand. She removed his tabard and helped him pull off the golden chain. While he sat near exhaustion, she began washing the blood from his face and arms, saying nothing as he watched her.

When he was clean, she took a dry cloth to his face and said, "You look tired, my lord."

"I see many things, Aglaranna, things not meant for a man to see. I bear the weight of ages upon my soul, and I am tired."

"Is there no comfort to be sought?"

He looked at her, their eyes locking. The commanding gaze was tempered by a hint of gentleness, but still she was forced to drop her eyes.

"Do you mock me, lady?"

She shook her head. "No, Tomas. I . . . came to comfort you, if you have need."

He reached out and took her hand, and drew her toward him, hunger in his eyes. When she was encircled by his embrace, feeling the rising passion in his body, she heard him say, "My need is great, lady."

Looking into his pale eyes, she dropped the final barriers between them. "As is mine, my lord."

## Training

He arose in the darkness.

He donned a simple white robe, a mark of his station, and left his cell. He waited outside the small simple room, containing a sleeping mat, a single candle, and a shelf for scrolls: all that was deemed necessary for his education.

Down the corridor he could see the others, all years younger than himself, standing quietly before the doors of their cells. The first black-clad master came along the corridor and stopped before one of the others. Without a word the man nodded, the other fell in behind him, and they marched away into the gloom. The dawn sent soft grey light through the high narrow windows in the hallway.

He, like the others, extinguished the torch on the wall opposite his door, at the first hint of day. Another man in black came down the corridor and another waiting youth left behind him. Soon a third. Then a fourth. After a time he found himself alone. The hallway was silent.

A figure emerged from the darkness, his robes conspiring to mask his coming until the last few feet. He stood before the young man in white and nodded, pointing down the corridor. The youth fell in behind his blackrobed guide, and they made their way down a series of torchlit passages, into the heart of the great building that had been the young man's home as long as he could remember. Soon they were travelling through a series of low tunnels, rank with the smell of age, and wet, as if deep below the lake that surrounded the building on all sides.

The man in black paused at a wooden door, slid a bolt aside, and opened it. The younger man entered behind the older and came to stand before a series of wooden troughs. Each was half the length of a man's height, and half that wide. One stood on the floor, and the others were arrayed above it, suspended by wooden supports in steps, one above the next, until the highest stood near the height of a man's head. All of those above had single holes in the end that overhung the trough below. In the bottom trough, water could be heard sloshing, as it responded to the vibrations of their footfalls on the stone floor.

The man in black pointed to a bucket and turned and left the young man in white alone.

The young man picked up the bucket and set about his task. All commands to those in white were given without words, and, as he had quickly learned when he had first become aware, those in white were not allowed to speak. He knew he could speak, for he understood the concept and had quietly tried to form a few words while lying on his mat in the dark. As with so many other things, he understood the fact, without being aware of how he understood. He knew that he existed before his first awakening in his cell, but was not in the least alarmed by his lack of memory. It seemed somehow proper.

He started his task. Like so many other things he was commanded to do, it seemed an impossible undertaking. He took the bucket and filled the topmost trough from the bottom one. As it had on days before, the water spilled from the top down into each successive trough, until the contents of the bucket rested again at the bottom. Doggedly he pursued his work, letting his mind go vacant, while his body undertook the mindless task.

As it did so many other times when left to its own devices, his mind danced from image to image, bright flashes of shapes and colors that eluded his grasp as he sought to close mental fingers around them. First came a brief glimpse of a beach, with crashing waves on rocks, black and weathered. Fighting. A strange-looking cold white substance lying on the ground—a word, snow, that fled as quickly as it came. A muddy camp. A great kitchen with boys hurrying about many tasks. A room in a high tower. Each passed with blinding quickness, leaving only an afterimage in its passing.

Daily a voice would sound in his head, and his mind's voice would respond with an answer, while he labored at his endless task. The voice would ask a simple question, and his mind's voice would answer. Should the answer be incorrect, the question would be repeated. If several wrong answers were made, the voice would cease its questioning, sometimes returning later in the day, sometimes not.

The white-clad worker felt the familiar pressure against the fabric of his thoughts.

-What is the law?the voice asked.

-The law is the structure that surrounds our lives, and gives them meaning-he answered.

What is the highest embodiment of the law?The Empire is the highest embodiment of the lawwhat are you? came the next question.

\_"I am a servant of the Empire

-The thought contact flickered for a moment, then returned, as if the other were considering the following question carefully.

In what manner are you allowed to serve?

-The question had been asked several times before, and always his answer had been met with the blank inner silence that told him he had answered incorrectly. This time he carefully considered, eliminating all the answers he had made previously, as well as those that were combinations or extrapolations of the previously incorrect ones.

Finally he answered-As I see fit.'

There was a surge of feeling from without, a feeling of approval. quickly another question followed.

-Where is your allotted place?He

thought about this, knowing that the obvious answer was likely to be the incorrect one, but still one that needed to be tested. He answered.

-My place is here

The mind contact was broken, as he suspected it would be. He knew that he was being trained, though the purpose of the training was masked from his mind. Now he could ponder the last question in light

of his previous answers and perhaps ascertain the correct response.

ThAT NIGhT he dreamed.

A strange man in a brown robe, tied with a whipcord belt, walked along the roadway. The man in brown turned and said, "Hurry up. We don't have much time, and you can't fall behind."

He tried to move faster but found his feet were lead and his arms tied to his sides. The man in brown halted his brisk walk and said, "Very well, then. One thing at a time."

He tried to speak and found his mouth refused to move. The man in brown stroked his beard thoughtfully, then said, "Consider this: you are the architect of your own imprisonment."

He looked down and saw that his bare feet were upon a dusty road.

He looked up, and the man in brown was again walking briskly away. He tried to follow and again couldn't move.

He awoke in a cold sweat.

AgAIN HE HAd been asked where his place was, and again his answer, Where I am needed-was unsatisfactory. He toiled over another pointless task, driving nails into a thick sheet of wool, which let them fall through to the floor, where he picked them up and drove them through again.

His reconsideration of the last question he had been asked was interrupted when the door behind him opened, and his guide motioned for him to follow. They moved through long passages, winding their way up to the level where they would eat the scant morning meal.

When they entered the hall, the guide took a place by the door, while others in black robes similarly escorted the white-clad ones into the hall.

This was the day that the young man's guide would stand and watch the boys in white, who, along with the young man, were bound to eat in silence. Each day a different wearer of the black robe filled this function.

The young man ate and considered the last question of the morning.

He weighed each possible answer, seeking out possible flaws, and as they were discovered, discarding them. Abruptly one answer came unbidden to his mind, an intuitive leap, as his subconscious provided him with a solution to the question. I am the architect of my own imprisonment.

Several times in the past, when particularly knotty problems had stopped his progress, this had occurred, which accounted for his rapid advancement in his lessons. He weighed the possible flaws in this answer, and when he was certain he was correct, he stood. Other eyes regarded him furtively, for this was a violation of the rules.

He went over to stand before his guide, who regarded his approach with a controlled expression, his only sign of curiosity being a slight arching of his brows.

Without preamble the young man in white said, "This is no longer my place."

The man in black showed no emotion, but placed a hand on the young man's shoulder and nodded slightly. He reached inside his robe and removed a small bell, which he rang once. Another black-robed individual appeared moments later. Without word the newcomer took



the place at the door, as the guide motioned for the young man to follow him.

They walked in silence as they had done many times before, until they came to a room. The man in black turned to the young man and said, "Open the door."

The young man started to reach for the door, then with a flash of insight pulled his hand away. Knitting his brow in concentration, he opened the door by the power of his mind. Slowly it swung inward. The man in black turned and smiled. "Good," he said, in a soft, pleasant voice.

They entered a room with many white, grey, and black robes hanging upon hooks. The man in black said, "Change to a grey robe."

The young man did so quickly and faced the other man. The man in black studied the new wearer of the grey. "You are no longer bound to silence. Any question you may have will be answered, as well as is possible, though there are still things that will be waited upon, until you don the black. Then you will fully understand. Come."

The young man in grey followed his guide to another room, where cushions surrounded a low table, upon which rested a pot of hot chocha, a pungent, bittersweet drink. The man in black poured two cups and handed one to the young man, indicating he should sit. They both sat, and the young man said, "Who am I?"

The man in black shrugged. "You will have to decide that, for only you can glean your true name. It is a name that must never be spoken to others, lest they gain power over you. Henceforward you will be called Milamber."

The newly named Milamber thought for a moment, then said, "It will serve. What are you called?"

"I am called Shimone."

"Who are you?"

"Your guide, your teacher. Now you will have others, but it was given to me to be responsible for the first part of your training, the longest part."

"How long have I been here?"

"Nearly four years."

Milamber was surprised by this, for his memory stretched back only a little, several months at best. "When will my memories be returned to me?"

Shimone smiled, for he was pleased that Milamber had not asked if they would be returned, and said as much. "Your mind will call up your past life as you progress in the balance of your training, slowly at first, ~ with more rapidity later. There is a reason for this. You must be able to withstand the lure of former ties, of family and nations, of friends and home. In your case that is particularly vital."

"why is that?"

"when your past returns to you, you will understand," was all

Shimone said, a smile on his face. His hawkish features and dark eyes were set in an expression that communicated the feeling this was the end of that topic.

Milamber thought of several questions, quickly discarding them as of less immediate consequence. Finally he asked, "what would have happened

if I had opened the door by hand?"

"You would have died." Shimone said this flatly, without emotion. Milamber was not surprised or shocked, he simply accepted it. "To what end?"

Shimone was a little surprised by the question and showed it. "We cannot rule each other, all we can do is ensure that each new magician is able to discharge the responsibility attendant upon his actions. You made the judgment that your place was no longer with those who wore the white, the novices. If that was not your place, then you would have to demonstrate your ability to deal with the responsibilities of this change. The bright but foolish ones often die at this stage."

Milamber considered this and acknowledged the propriety of such a test. "How long will my training continue?"

Shimone made a noncommittal gesture. "As long as it takes. You rise rapidly, however, so I think it will not be too much longer in your case. You have certain natural gifts, and you will understand this when your memory returns—a certain advantage over the other, younger, students who started with you."

Milamber studied the contents of his cup. In the thin, dark fluid he seemed to glimpse a single word, as if seen from the corner of the eye, that vanished when he tried to focus upon it. He couldn't hang on to it, but it had been a short name, a simple name.

ThAT NIGht he dreamed again.

The man in brown walked along the road, and this time Milamber could follow. "You see, there are few objective limits. what they teach you is useful, but never accept the proposition that just because a solution satisfies a problem, that it must be the only solution."

The man in brown stopped. "Look at this," he said, pointing to a flower beside the road. Milamber leaned down to see what the man was pointing at. A small spider spun a web between two leaves. "That creature," said the man in brown, "toils oblivious to our passing. Either of us could crush out its existence at whim. Consider this, then: if that creature could somehow apprehend our existence, our threat to its life, would the spider worship us?"

"I don't know," Milamber answered. "I don't know how a spider thinks."

The man in brown leaned upon his staff. "Considering how little humans think alike, it might be that this spider would react with fear, defiance, indifference, fatalism, or incredulity. Anything's possible." He reached out with his staff and gently caught a piece of spider silk on the wooden pole. Lifting the tiny arachnid, he transported it over to the opposite side of the road. "Do you think the creature knows that this is a different flower?"

"I don't know."

The man in brown smiled. "That is perhaps the wisest of all answers."

Returning to his walk, he said, "You will be seeing many things soon, some of which will make little sense to you. when you do, remember one thing."

"what is that?" asked Milamber.

"Things are not always what they seem. Remember the spider, who at this very moment may be offering prayers to me in thanks for its sudden bounty." Pointing back with the staff at the plant, he said, "There are a great many more bugs on that one than the other." Scratching at his beard he added, "I wonder: is the flower also offering prayers of thanks?"

HE SPENT WEEKS in the company of Shimone and a few others. He knew more of his life, though only a fragment of what was missing. He had been a slave, and he had been discovered to have the power. He remembered a woman, and felt a faint tugging at the thought of her vaguely remembered image.

He was quick to learn. Each lesson was accomplished in a single day, or at most two. He would quickly dissect each problem given, and when it was time to discuss it with his teachers, his questions were to the point, well thought out, and proper.

One day he arose, in a newer but still simple cell, and emerged to find Shimone waiting for him. The black-robed magician said, "From this point on, you may not speak until you have finished the task set for you."

Milamber nodded his understanding and followed his guide down the hall. The older magician led him through a series of long tunnels to a place in the building he had never been before. They mounted a long staircase, rising many stories above where they had started. Upward they climbed, until Shimone opened a door for him. Milamber preceded Shimone through the door and found himself upon an open flat roof, atop a high tower. From the center of the roof a single spire rose. Skyward it shot, a needle of fashioned rock. Winding upward around it was a narrow stairway, carved into the side of the needle. Milamber's eyes followed it until the top was lost in the clouds. He found the sight fascinating, for it seemed to violate several canons of physical law that he had studied. Still, it stood before him, and what was more, his guide was indicating that he should mount the steps. He started upward. As he completed his first circumnavigation, he noted that Shimone had disappeared through the wooden door. Relieved of his presence, Milamber turned his gaze outward from the roof, drinking in the vista around him.

He was atop the highest tower of an immense city of towers. Everywhere he looked, hundreds of stone fingers pointed upward, strong structures with windows turning blind eyes outward. Some were open to the sky, as this one was; others were roofed in stone, or in shimmering lights. But of them all, this one alone was topped by a thin spire. Below the hundreds of towers, bridges arched through the sky, connecting them, and farther down could be seen the bulk of the single, incredible building that supported all he saw. It was a monster of construction. Sprawling below him, it stretched away for miles in every direction. He had known it would be a large place, from his travels within, but this knowledge did nothing to lessen his awe at the sight.

Still farther down, in the dim extreme of his vision, he could see the faint green of grass, a thin border edging the dark bulk of the building. On all sides he saw water, the once-glimpsed lake. In the distance he

could make out the hazy suggestion of mountains, but unless he strained to see them, it was as if the entire world were arrayed below. Plodding upward, he turned around the spire as he climbed. Each circle brought him a new detail of the vista. A single bird wheeled high above all else, ignorant of the affairs of men, its scarlet wings spread to catch the air as it watched with keen eye the lake below. Seeing a telltale flicker on the water, it folded back its wings and stooped, hitting the surface for the briefest moment before it climbed aloft once more, a flopping prize clutched in its talons. With a cry of victory it circled once, then sped westward.

A turn. A play of winds. Each carried suggestions of far and alien lands. From the south a gust with a hint of hot jungles where slaves toiled to reclaim farmlands from deadly, water-shrouded marshes. From the east a breeze carried the victory chant of a dozen warriors of the Thuril Confederation, after defeating an equal number of Empire soldiers in a border clash. In counterpoint there was a faint echo of a dying Tsurani soldier, crying for his family. From the north came the smell of ice and the sound of the hooves of thousands of Thun pounding over the frozen tundra, heading south for warmer lands. From the west, the laughter of the young wife of a powerful noble teasing a halfterrified, half-aroused household guard into betraying her husband, away conducting business with a merchant in Tusan to the south. From the east, the smell of spices as merchants haggled in the market square in far Yankora. Again south, and the smell of salt from the Sea of Blood.

North, and windswept ice fields that had never known the tread of human feet, but over which beings old and wise in ways unknown to men walked, seeking a sign in the heavens-one that never came. Each breeze brought a note and tone, a color and hue, a taste and fragrance. The texture of the world blew by, and he breathed deeply, savoring it. A turn. From the steps below came a pulsing as the world beat with a life - of its own. Upward through the island, through the building, through the tower, the spire, and his very body came the urgent yet eternal beating of the planet's heart. He cast his eyes downward and saw deep caverns, the upper ones worked by slaves who harvested the few rare metals to be found, along with coal for heat and stone for building. Below these were other caverns, some natural, others the remnants of a lost city, overblown by dust that became soil as the ages passed. Here once dwelled creatures beyond his ability to imagine. Deeper still his vision plunged him, to a region of heat and light, where primeval forces contested. Liquid rock, inflamed and glowing, pushed against its solid cousin, seeking a passage upward, mindlessly driven by nature. Deeper still, to a world of pure force, where lines of energy ran through the heart of the world.

A turn, and he stepped upon a small platform atop the spire. It was less than his own height in size on each side, an impossibly precarious perch. He stepped to the middle, overcoming a vertigo that tried to send him screaming over the edge. He employed every part of his ability and training to stand there, for he understood without being told that to fail here was to die.

He cleared his mind of fear and looked around at the scene before him, awed by the expanse of emptiness. Never before had he felt so

truly isolated, so truly alone. Here he stood with nothing between him and whatever fate was allotted to him.

Below him stretched the world and above him an empty sky. The wind held a hint of moisture, and he saw dark clouds racing up from the south. The tower, or the needle upon it, swayed slightly, and he unconsciously shifted his weight to compensate.

Lightning flashed as the storm clouds rushed toward him, and thunder broke around his head. The very sound was enough to dislodge him from the small platform, and he was forced to delve deeper into his inner well of power, into that silent place known only as *wal*, and there he found the strength to resist the onslaught of the storm.

Winds buffeted him, slamming him toward the platform's edge. He reeled and recovered, the darkling abyss below beckoning to him, inviting his fall. With a surge of will, he brushed aside the vertigo once again and set his mind to the task ahead.

In his mind a voice cried, -Now is the time of testing. Upon this tower you must stand, and should your will falter, from it you will fall.

There was a momentary pause, then the voice cried once more, -Behold.! Witness and understand how it was Blackness swept upward, and he was' consumed.

FoR A TIME he floats, nameless and lost. A pinpoint of flickering consciousness, an unknown swimmer through a black and empty sea. Then a single note invades the void. It reverberates, a soundless sound, a sense-lacking intruder on the senses. -Without senses, how is there perception.?\_ his mind asks. His mind! -I am.!- he cries, and a million philosophies cry out in wonder. -If I am, then what is not me.? \_he wonders.

An echo replies, -you are that which you are, and not that which you are not

-An unsatisfactory answer- he muses.

~ood-.replies the echo.

-What is that note?- he asks.

-It is the touch of an old man's sleep the moment before death

-Whatt is that note?

-It is the color of winter

-What is that note.?\_

-It is the sound of hope

-What is that note.?\_

-It is the taSte of love

-What is that note?

-It is an alarm to wake you

He FLOATs. Around him swim a billion billion stars. Great clusters drift by, ablaze with energy. In riots of color they spin, giant reds and blues, the smaller oranges and yellows, and the tiny reds and whites. The colorless and angry black ones drink in the storm of light around them, while others pulse out energies in an unknown spectrum, and a few twist the fabric of space and time, sending his vision swimming as he tries to fathom their passing. From each to each a line of force

stretches, binding them all in a net of power. Back and forth along the strands of this web energy flows, pulsing with a life that is not life. The stars know as they fly by. They are aware of his presence, but acknowledge it not. He is too small for them to be concerned with. Around him stretches away the whole of the universe.

At various points in the web, creatures of power rest or work, each different from the others, but all somehow the same. Some he can see are gods, for they are familiar to him, and others are less or more. Each plays a role. Some regard him, for his passing is not without notice; some are beyond him, too great to comprehend him, and so being, are less than he. Others study him closely, weighing his power and abilities against their own. He studies them in return. All are silent.

He speeds among the stars and the beings of power, until he espies a star, one among the multitude, but one that calls to him. From the star twenty lines of energy lead away, and near each is a being of power. Without knowing why, he understands that here are the ancient gods of Kelewan. Each plays on the nearest line of power influencing the structure of space and time nearby. Some contest among themselves, others work oblivious to the strife, and still others do nothing that is discernible.

He moves closer. A single planet swings about the star, a blue-and-green sphere shrouded in white clouds. Kelewan.

Down the lines of force he plunges, until he is on the surface. Here he sees a world untouched by the footprint of man. Great beasts with six legs stride the land, and hiding from them are a young race of quickthinking beings.

The cho-ja, a few bands of scurrying creatures, little more than the largeinsects that spawned them, speed through the trees of the great forests, fearing the large predators who hunt them, as they in turn hunt smaller game. They have begun to reason, and their queens now design each for a specific purpose, so strong and well-armed soldiers protect the foragers. More food is brought to the hive, and the race begins to prosper.

Over the plains the young Thun males race, fighting among themselves with rocks and sticks, fists and fang. They clash knowing only there is a nameless urge driving them on, demanding that one or another from their band drive off the others and sire the next generation of young. It will be ages before they become reasoning beings, able to work together against the two-legged creatures who have yet to appear upon this world.

Near the sea, not yet named for the blood of thousands killed upon it, the Sunn huddle on the shore, newly emerged from the sea, discomforted upon the land, but no longer able to abide in the deep. Fearing all, they plot in their sea-caves, seeking security and building an attitude toward outsiders that will set the stage for their genocide generations later.

Above the mountains, the Thrillillil soar, their culture formative and crude, only little more than a loose association of breeding pairs and young. Their large but delicate wings cast shadows that hide the Nummongnum,

who creep along the edge of the rocks, hidden from sight by their mottled fur, which resembles the stones behind which they scurry, seeking Thrillillil eggs, beginning a war that will last a thousand years and end in the annihilation of both races.

This is a harsh world, abundant with life, but contentious life, with no mercy for the weak. Of those races he sees, only two will endure, the ThUn and the cho-ja. He sees darkness approaching like a sudden storm, and it sweeps over him.

LiKE THE CALM after the storm, light comes.

He stands on a cliff looking down upon a great plain of grass separated from the sea by a small beach. A shimmering in the air begins, and the sea beyond the plain is distorted. Like the agitation of the air by the heat of the day, the scene ripples. Scintillating colors appear in the air. Then, as if by two giant hands, the very fabric of space and time is torn, an ever-widening gap through which he can see. Beyond this fracture in the air, a vision of chaos is revealed, a mad display of energy, as if all the lines of power in that universe are torn asunder. Bolts of energy sufficient to destroy suns explode in displays of color beyond the ability of mortal eyes to describe, leaving them dazzled with lesser lights. From deep within this giant rift, a wide bridge of golden light extends downward, until it touches the grass of the plain. Upon the bridge thousands of figures are moving, escaping the madness beyond the rift to the serenity of the plain.

Downward they hurry, some carrying all they own on their backs, others with animals pulling wagons and sleds heaped with valuables. All press forward, fleeing a nameless horror behind.

He studies the figures, and though much is alien, he can see much that is also familiar. Many wear short robes of plain fashion, and he knows he is looking upon the seeds of the Tsurani race. Their faces are more basic, showing less of the blending with others that would take place in years to come. Most are fair, with brown or blond hair. At their feet run barking dogs, sleek and swift greyhounds and whippets.

Next to them stride proud warriors, with slanted eyes and bronze skin. These are fighting men, but not organized soldiers, for they wear robes of different cut and color one from the other. Each steps down off the bridge, some showing wounds, all hiding terror behind implacable expressions. Over their shoulders they carry long swords of fine steel, fashioned with great care. The tops of their heads are shaved, with the hair around pulled back into a knot. These bear the proud look of men unsure if they are better off for having survived the battle. Mixed among them are others, all strangers.

A race of short people carry nets that proclaim them fishers, though of what sea only they know. They have dark hair, sallow skin, and greygreen eyes. Men, women, and children all wear simple fur trousers, leaving upper bodies bare.

Behind them come a nation of tall, noble, black-skinned people.

Their robes are richly fashioned of soft and subtle colors. Many have gems adorning their foreheads, and gold bands on their arms. All are weeping for a homeland never to be seen again.

Then come riders upon impossible beasts that look like flying serpents with feathered birds' heads. Upon the riders' faces are masks of animals and birds, brightly painted and plumed. They are covered in paint alone, for their homeworld was a hot place. They wear their nakedness like a cloak, for there is beauty in their form, as if each had been fashioned by a master sculptor, and they bear weapons of black glass. Women and children ride behind the men' unmasked, revealing expressions made harsh by the cruel world they flee. The Serpent Riders turn their creatures eastward and fly away. The great flying snakes will die out in the cold highlands of the east, but will remain forever in the legends of the proud Thuril.

Thousands more come, all walking down the golden ramp to set foot upon Kelewan. When they reach the plain, some move off, traveling to other parts of the planet, but many stay and watch as thousands more come across the bridge. Time passes, night follows day, then gives way to day once more, while the hosts enter from the insane storm of chaos. With them come twenty beings of power, also fleeing the utter destruction of a universe. The multitudes upon the plain cannot see them passing, but he can. He knows they will become the twenty gods of Kelewan, the Ten Higher and Ten Lower Beings. They fly upward, to wrest the lines of power from the ancient, feeble beings who hold station around this world. There is no struggle as the new gods take their stations, for the old beings of power know a newer order is coming into the world.

After days of watching, he sees that the stream of humanity is thinning.

Hundreds of men and women pull huge boats made from some metal, shining in the sun, mounted on wheds of a black substance. They reach the plain and see the ocean beyond the narrow beach. They give a shout and pull their boats to the water and launch them. Fifty boats raise sail and set out across the ocean, heading southward, for the land that will become Tsubar, the lost nation.

The last group is composed of thousands of men in robes of many designs and colors. He knows that these are the priests and magicians of many nations. Together they stand, holding back the raging madness beyond. As he watches, many fall, their lives burning out like spent candles. At some prearranged signal, many of them, but less than one for each hundred standing at the top of the golden bridge, turn and flee downward. All are holding books, scrolls, and other tomes of knowledge. when they reach the bottom of the bridge, they turn and watch the unfolding drama at the top.

Those above, looking not at those who have fled but at what they hold back, give forth a shout, incanting a mighty spell, wielding magic of enormous power. Those below echo their cries, and all who can hear them quail in dread at the sound. The bridge begins to dissolve, from the ground up. A flood of terror and hate comes pouring through the rift, and those who stand atop the bridge begin to crumple before its onslaught. As the bridge and the opening above disappear from sight, a single blast of fury comes through that stuns many who stand upon the plain below, felling them as if with a blow.

For some time those who escaped the nameless terror behind the rift stand mute. Then slowly they start to disperse. Groups break away and



move off. He knows that, in years to come, these ragged refugees will conquer this world, for they are the seeds of the nations that populate Kelewan.

He knows he has seen the beginning of the nations, and their flight from the Enemy, the nameless terror that destroyed the homes of the races of mankind, dispersing them to other universes.

Again the cloak of time is drawn over him, creating darkness.

FOLLOWeD BY LIGHT.

On the plain that had been empty, a great city stands. Its white towers ascend to the skies. Its people are industrious, and the city prospers.

Caravans of trade goods come overland, and great ships call from across the sea. Years speed by, bringing war and famine, peace and bounty.

One day a ship pulls into the harbor, as scarred and ill as its crew. A great battle has been fought, and this ship is one of the few to survive.

Those across the water will come soon, and the City of the Plains will fall if help is not forthcoming. Runners are sent north to the cities along the great river, for should the white city fall, nothing will prevent the invaders from striking northward. Runners return, carrying the news.

The armies of the other cities will come. He watches as they gather and meet the invaders near the sea. The invaders are repulsed, but the cost is great, for the battle rages twelve days. A hundred thousand men die, and the sands are red for months. A thousand ships burn, and the sky is filled with black smoke, and for days it falls upon the land, covering miles about with a fine, powdery ash. The city of white becomes the city of grey. The sea is called Blood from that day forward, and the great bay is called Battle. But out of the battle an alliance is formed, and the seeds of the great Empire are planted, the world-spanning Empire of Tsuranuanni.

Like silence descending, darkness comes.

As A ClaRION sounding, light returns.

He stands atop a temple, in the heart of the central city of the Empire. Below, thousands of people stand. Shoulder to shoulder they fill the streets, chanting while thousands of upraised hands pass along great wooden platforms overhead. Upon the platforms stand the nobles of the Empire, Lords of the Five Great Families. Upon the last platform, largest of all, rests a golden throne, fashioned from the rarest of metals of this mineral-poor world. Upon this throne sits a young boy. When the platform reaches the Great Square of the Twenty Higher and Lower Gods, it is placed upon the ground, and the throne is carried on the backs of the citizens to the top of the highest temple.

The throne is lowered, facing southeast, from where the nations had come in the beginning. From deep within the temple, a dozen blackclad priestesses rush forth, red-clad priests at their side. The Priestesses of Sibi, the Death Goddess, point out one or another citizen in the crowd, and the red-clad Priests of the Killing God grab them. They seize men, women, and occasionally children. All are dragged to the top of the temple, where waiting priests of the Red God cut their hearts from

their bodies, while the priests and priestesses of the other eighteen orders look on silently. When hundreds have been sacrificed, and the temple steps are bathed in blood, the Chief Priestess of the Death Goddess judges the gods satisfied. They place a silver ring upon the boy's hand, and a golden circlet upon his brow, and proclaim him the Light of Heaven, Minjochka, eleven times Emperor. The boy plays with a wooden toy given to him at the start of the day, for he grows bored easily, while the throng presses forward to dip their hands in the blood of their countrymen, counting it lucky to do so. In the east, the sky darkens as night approaches.

As THE SUN rises, he stands near a magician who has worked the night through. The man grows alarmed at what his calculations have shown, and he incants a spell that takes him to another place. The watcher follows. In a small hall, several more magicians react with expressions of dread to the news the first magician brings. A messenger is dispatched to the Warlord, ruler of the Empire in the Emperor's name. The Warlord summons the magicians. The watcher follows. The magicians explain the news. The signs in the stars, along with ancient writings, herald the coming of a great disaster. A star, a wanderer in the heavens sighted where none has been seen before, stands motionless but grows brighter. It will bring destruction to the nations. The Warlord is skeptical, but of late more and more nobles have come to heed the words of magicians. There have always been legends of magicians saving the nations from the Enemy, but few think them likely. Still, there is now this new convocation of magicians, who have formed something called the Assembly, toward what ends only the magicians know. So, with the changing times in mind, the Warlord agrees to take the news to the Emperor. After a time an order is sent to the Assembly by the Emperor. His demand: bring proof. The magicians shake their heads and return to their modest halls.

Decades pass, and the magicians conduct a campaign of propaganda, seeking to influence any noble of the Empire who will listen. The day arrives when the news is proclaimed that the Emperor is dead and his son now reigns. The magicians gather with all who can travel to the Holy City for the coronation of the new Emperor. Thousands of people line the streets, while slaves bear the nobles of the land in litters to the great temples. The new Emperor rides the ancient golden throne, borne by a hundred husky slaves. He is crowned, while a slave is sacrificed deep within the halls of the temple of the Death God, Turakamu, as a petition to the gods to allow the old Emperor's soul to rest in heaven.

The crowd cheers, for Sudkahanchoza, thirty-four times Emperor) is well loved, and this will be the last time they will ever look upon him. He will now retire to the Holy Palace, where his soul will stand forever vigilant on behalf of his subjects, while the Warlord and the High Council conduct the business of governing the Empire. The new Emperor will live a contemplative life, reading, painting, studying the great books of the temples, seeking to purify his soul for this arduous life. This Emperor is unlike his father and, after hearing the grave news from the Assembly, orders the building of a great castle upon an island

in the center of the giant lake in the midst of the mountains of  
Ambdina.  
Time

#### PASSES.

Hundreds of black-clad magicians stand atop towers that rise from the city of the island, not yet the magnificent single entity of the future. Two hundred years have passed, and now two suns burn in the sky, one warm and yellow-green, the other small, white, and angry. The watcher sees the men work their magic, the greatest spell cast in the history of the nations. Even the legendary bridge from the outside, the beginning of time, was not so great a feat, for then they had only moved between worlds, now they would move a star. Below he can feel the presence of hundreds of other magicians, adding their power to those above. The spell has been wrought over the last few years, each step taken with the greatest care, as the Stranger approaches. Though powerful beyond compare, this enchantment is also delicate in the extreme. Any misstep and its work will be undone. He looks up and sees. the Stranger, its course marked toward the path of this world. It will not strike Kelewan, but there is little doubt that its heat added to Kelewan's already hot star will render the planet lifeless. Kelewan will hang for over a year between its own primary and the Stranger, in constant daylight, and all magicians agree that only a few might survive in deep caves, to emerge to a burned-out planet. Now they must act, before it is too late to try again should the enchantment fail.

Now they do act, all in concert, incanting the last piece of the great arcane work. The world seems to stand still for a moment, reverberating with the final word of the spell. Slowly that reverberation grows louder, picking up resonance, developing new harmonies, new overtones, a character of its own. Soon it is loud enough to deafen those in the , towers, who cover their ears. Below, those on the ground stand in mute wonder, looking to the sky where a blaze of color begins to form. Ragged bursts of energy flash, and the light from the two stars is dimmed in momentarily blinding displays that will leave some who viewed them sightless for the rest of their lives. He is not affected by the sound or light, as if some agency has taken care to protect him from their effects. A great rift appears in the sky, much like the one the golden bridge came through ages ago. He watches without emotion, his strongest feeling being detached fascination. It grows in the sky, between the Stranger and Kelewan, and begins to move away from the planet, toward the invading star.

But something else occurs. From the heart of the rift, more violent than at the time of the golden bridge, an unprecedented display of erupting energies comes forth. The chaotic scene is matched with an overwhelming wave of hatred. The Enemy, the evil power that drove the nations to Kelewan, still abides in the other universe, and it has not forgotten those who escaped it ages ago. It cannot pierce the barrier of the rift, for it needs more time to move between universes than the life span of the rift, but it reaches forth and warps it, sending it away from the Stranger. The rift grows larger, and those on the ground see it is going to engulf Kelewan, bringing the planet back into the dominion of

the Enemy.

The watcher looks on impassively, unlike those around him, for he knows that this is not the end of the world. The rift rushes toward the planet, and one magician comes forth.

He is somehow familiar to the one who watches. The man, unlike those around him, wears a brown robe, fastened round with a whipcord belt, and holds a staff of wood. He raises the staff above his head and incants. The rift changes, from colors impossible to describe to inky black, and it strikes the planet.

The heavens explode for a moment, then all around is black. when the darkness lifts, the sun, Kelewan's own, is dropping below the horizon.

The magicians who are not dead or mad stare upward in horror.

Above them the sky is a void, without stars.

And the man in brown turns to him and says, "Remember, things are not always what they seem."

Blackness

HERALDS THE passing of time again. He is standing in the halls of the Assembly. Magicians are appearing regularly, using the pattern on the floor as a focal point for their transit. Each remembers the pattern like an address, and wills himself there. A message arrives from the Emperor. He begs the Assembly to solve the problem, promising them whatever aid they require.

The watcher moves forward through generations to find the magicians again upon the towers. Now, instead of the invading Stranger, they regard a starless sky. Another spell, years in the fashioning, is being incanted. when it is finished, the earth reverberates with violent energies.

Suddenly the sky is ablaze with stars, and Kelewan is again in its normal place.

"Things are not always what they seem," says a voice.

The Emperor sends a command that the full Assembly should come to the Holy City at once. By ones and twos they use the patterns to travel to Kentosani. The watcher follows. There they are taken to the inner chamber of the Emperor's palace, something unheard of in the history of the Empire.

Of the seven thousand magicians who gathered a century before to thwart the Stranger, only two hundred survived. Even now that number has increased but slightly, so that not even one magician for each twenty who stood upon towers against the Stranger answers the Emperor's call. They advance to stand before Tukamaco, forty times Emperor, descendant of Sudkahanchoza, and Light of Heaven. The Emperor asks if the Assembly will accept the charge to stand ever vigilant over the Empire, protecting it until the end of time. The magicians confer and agree. The Emperor then leaves his throne and abases himself before the assembled magicians, something never done before. He sits back and, still on his knees before them, throws wide his arms and proclaims that from this day forth the magicians are the Great Ones, free from all obligations, save the charge just accepted. They are outside the law, and none may command them, including the Warlord, who stands to one side, a frown upon his face. whatever they desire is theirs

to ask, for their words will be as law.  
And a magician smiles knowingly at another nearby.  
Darkness . . .

AND TIME passes.

The watcher stands before the warlord's throne. A delegation of magicians stand before the Warlord. They present him with proof of what they have claimed. A controllable rift, free from the Enemy's influence, has been opened, and another world has been found. This is unsuitable for life-but a second has been discovered, a rich, ripe world. They show him a lifetime's worth of wealth in metals, all found lying about, discarded. He who watches smiles to himself over the Warlord's eagerness at the sight of a broken breastplate, a rusted sword, and a handful of bent nails. To further prove this is an alien world, they present him with a strange but beautiful flower. The Warlord smells it and is pleased with its rich fragrance. The watcher nods, for he, too, knows the richness of a Midkemian rose.

The black wing of passing time covers him again.

ONCE MORE HE stood upon the platform. He looked around and saw that the full fury of the storm was breaking around him. Only by his unconscious will had he been able to stand upon this platform, while his conscious mind was occupied by the unfolding history of Kelewan. He now understood the nature of the test, for he found himself exhausted from the energy he had expended during the ordeal. While being instilled with the final instruction in his place in this society, he had been tested with the raw fury of nature.

He took a last look around, finding the grim view of the storm-tossed lake and the shuttered windows of the towers somehow satisfying. He strove to capture this image, as if to ensure that he would forever remember the moment he came to his full awakening as a Great One, for there were no more blocks on his memory, or his emotions. He exulted in his power: no longer Pug the keep boy, but now a magician of power to dwarf the imagination of his former master, Kulgan. And never again would either of these worlds, Midkemia or Kelewan, seem the same to him. By force of will he descended to the roof, floating gently through the raging wind. The door opened in anticipation of his coming. He entered, and it closed behind him. Shimone was waiting for him, a smile upon his face. As they moved down the long halls of the Assembly building-city, the skies outside exploded with clashes of thunder, as if heralding his arrival.

HoChOPEPA sat upon his mat, awaiting the arrival of his guest. The heavy, bald magician was interested in gauging the mettle of the newest member of the Assembly, come into his estate as a wearer of the black robe the previous day.

A chime sounded, announcing his guest's arrival. Hochopepa stood and crossed his richly furnished apartment. He pulled aside the sliding door. "Welcome, Milamber. I am pleased you saw fit to accept my invitation."

"I am honored," was all Milamber said as he entered and regarded

the room. Of all the quarters in the Assembly building he had seen, this was by far the most opulent. The hangings on the walls were rich cloth, enhanced with the finest threadwork, and there were several valuable metal objects adorning various shelves.

Milamber made a study of his host as well. The heavysset magician showed Milamber to a cushion before a low table and then poured cups of chocha. His plump hands moved with controlled ease, precisely and efficiently. His dark, nearly black, eyes shone from under the thick brows that accented an otherwise deceptively bland face. He was the stockiest magician Milamber had seen yet, as most who wore the black robe tended to be thin and ascetic looking. Milamber sensed this was ~ly by design, as if someone occupied with the pleasures of the flesh couldn't be too concerned with matters of deep thought.

After the first sip of chocha had been taken, Hochopepa said, "You pose something of a problem for me, Milamber."

When Milamber made no comment, Hochopepa said, "You make no ' remark." Milamber inclined his head in agreement. "Perhaps your background accounts for a bit more wariness than is the rule here."

Milamber said, "A slave become magician is something to ponder."

Hochopepa waved his hand. "It is a rarity for a slave to don the black robe, but not unheard of. Occasionally the power is not recognized until adulthood. But the laws are explicit, and no matter how late the power is revealed, nor how mean the station of the man manifesting it, from that instant on he is subject only to the Assembly. Once a soldier was ordered hanged by his lord. He floated, suspended in space, a scant hair's breadth from hanging, by sheer power of will. His power finally manifested itself at the moment of his greatest need. He was given over to the Assembly, where he survived training, but proved to be a magician of indierent power and overall poor outlook.

"But that is not for this discussion. Your particular situation, the one that makes you somewhat of a problem for me, is that you are a barbarian excuse me, were a barbarian."

Milamber smiled again. He had left the Tower of Testing with all his memories of his life, though much about his training was still sketchy. He understood the processes that had been used to bring him into control of his magic. They had singled him out as one among a hundred thousand, a Great One. Of the two hundred million people of the empire, he was one of two thousand magicians of the black robe. His slave-bred wariness, as Hochopepa pointed out, combined with his intelligence to keep him silent. Hochopepa was trying to make a point, . and Milamber would wait to hear what it was, no matter how roundabout the stout magician insisted on being.

When Milamber said nothing, Hochopepa continued. "Your position for several reasons. The obvious one is that you are the first to wear the black who is not of this world. The second is that you were the apprentice of a Lesser Magician."

Milamber raised an eyebrow. "Kulgan? You know of my training?"

Hochopepa laughed, a genuine belly laugh, which made Milamber relax his guard a little and regard the other man with a little less distrust.

"Of course. There was not one aspect of your background that

was not closely examined, for you provided a wealth of information about your world." Hochopepa looked closely at his guest. "The Warlord might choose to launch an invasion into a world we know little about-over the objections of some of his magician advisers, I might add-but we of the Assembly prefer to study our adversaries. We were most relieved to learn magic is restricted to the province of priests and followers of the Lesser Path on your world."

"Again you mention a Lesser Magic. what is your meaning?"

It was Hochopepa's turn to look slightly surprised. "I assumed you knew." Milamber shook his head. "The Path of Lesser Magic is walked by some who can operate certain forces by power of will, though of a different order than we of the black robe."

"Then you know of my previous failure."

Hochopepa laughed again. "Yes. Had you been less suited to the Greater Path, you might have learned his ways. As it is, you had too much ability to have succeeded as a Lesser Path magician. It is a talent rather than an art, the Lesser Path. The Greater Path is for scholars."

Milamber nodded. Each time Hochopepa explained a concept, it was as if Milamber had known it all his life. He remarked on this.

"It is easy enough to understand. During your training many facts and concepts were taught you. The basic concepts of magic were taught early, your responsibility to the Empire later. Part of the process of bringing all your abilities to maturity requires that all these facts be there when you need them. But much of what you were taught was also masked, to be revealed when you needed it, when you could fully understand what was in your mind. There will be a period when thoughts will come unbidden from time to time. As you frame a question, the answer will appear in your mind. And sometimes an answer will come as you read it or hear it. It serves to keep you from reeling under the impact of years of learning coming upon you in an instant.

"It is not unlike the spells used to grant you the visions on the Tower of Testing. Obviously, we have no means to 'see' what occurred before the time of the bridge, or at any other time in history, but we can plant suggestions, create illusion-"

Things are not what they seem. Milamber barely hid his surprise at this unexpected voice in his mind.

"-and provide a construct around which you may add the images most significant to you. Personally, I find the entire presentation upon the Tower reeks of Grand Opera. You may avail yourself of the libraries should you seek history rather than theater." Seeing Milamber's attentions were elsewhere, Hochopepa said, "In any event, we were speaking of other things."

Milamber said, "I would hear of your problem."

Hochopepa adjusted his robe, smoothing the creases. "Indulge me a moment longer for a brief digression. It all has bearing on why I asked you here." Milamber signified that Hochopepa should continue.

"Little is known of our peoples before the Escape. We know that the nations came from many different worlds. There is also some speculation that others fled the Enemy to different worlds, your former homeworld among them perhaps. There are a few shreds of evidence to support that hypothesis, but it is only conjecture at this point." Milamber

thought about the games of shah he had played with the Lord of the Shinzawai and considered the possibility.

"We came as refugees. Of millions, only thousands survived to plant seeds here. We found this world old and used up. Great civilizations once flourished here, and all that is left of them are worn, smooth stones where once cities stood. Who these creatures were, no one knows. This world has few metals, and what was brought with us in the Escape wore away over the ages. Our animals, like your horses and cattle, died out, all save for dogs. We had to adjust to our new homeworld, and to each other.

"We fought many wars between the time of the Escape and the advent of the Stranger. We were little more than city-states until the Battle of a Thousand Ships. Then the humblest of the races, the Tsurani, rose to conquer all others, uniting most of this world in a single Empire.

"We of the Assembly support the Empire because on this world it is the single most powerful force for order—not because it is noble, or fair, or beautiful, or just. But because of it the majority of humanity can live and work without war in their homelands, can live without famine, plagues, and the other disasters of older times. And with this order around us, we of the Assembly can work unhindered.

"It was the attempt to dispel the Stranger that first made it apparent that we must be able to work unhindered by anyone, including the Emperor, with whatever resources are necessary. We were robbed of precious time for action by the Emperor's lack of cooperation when we first learned of the Stranger. Had we been given support at once, we might have been able to deal with the Enemy when it acted to warp the rift. That is why we accepted the charge to defend and serve the Empire, in exchange for total freedom."

Milamber said, "This is all apparent as you speak of it. I am still waiting to hear of your problem regarding me."

Hochopepa sighed. "In good time, my friend. I must finish one last thought. You must understand why the Assembly functions as it does to have any hope of surviving more than a few weeks."

Milamber looked openly surprised at this remark. "Survive?"

"Yes, Milamber, survive, for there are many here who would have seen you at the bottom of the lake during your training."

"Why?"

"We work to restore the Greater Art. When we fled the Enemy, at the dawn of history, only one magician in a thousand who battled the Enemy survived. They, for the most part, were the Lesser Magicians and apprentices. They banded together in small groups to protect the knowledge they brought with them from their homeworlds. At first countryman would seek out countryman, then, later, larger associations grew, as desire grew to restore the lost arts. After centuries had passed, the Assembly was founded, and magicians from all parts of the world came, until today all who walk the Greater Path are members of the Assembly. Most of those who practice the Lesser Art serve here as well, though they are afforded a different level of respect and freedom. They tend to be better at building devices and understanding the forces of nature than we of the black robes—they build the orbs we use to transport



ourselves from place to place, for one example. while not outside the law, the Lesser Magicians are protected from interference from others by the Assembly. All magicians are the province of the Assembly." Milamber said, "So we gain freedom to act as we see fit, as long as we act in the best interest of the Empire."

Hochopepa nodded. "It does not matter what we do, or even that two magicians may find themselves at odds over some action or another, as long as both are working in what they believe is the best interest of the Empire."

"From my somewhat 'barbaric' point of view, a strange law."

"Not a law, but a tradition. On this world, my barbaric friend, tradition and custom can be a much stronger constraint than law. Laws are changed, but tradition endures."

"I think I see what your problem is, my civilized friend. You are not sure if I will act in the best interest of the Empire, being an outlander."

Hochopepa nodded. "Were we certain that you were capable of acting against the Empire, you would have been killed. As it is, we are uncertain, though we tend to believe it unlikely you are capable of such

For the first time Milamber was completely unsure of what he was hearing. "I was under the assumption that you had ways of ensuring that all who are trained are loyal to the Empire, as the first duty."

"Normally, yes. In your case we faced problems new to us. As far as . can tell, you are submerged in the underlying cause of the brotherhood of magicians, the order of the Empire. Usually we are certain. We simply read the apprentice's mind. With you we couldn't. We had to rely on truth drugs, long interrogations, and training drills designed to show any duplicity."

"why?"

"Not for any reason we understand. The spells of thought masking are known. It was nothing of that sort. It was as if your mind held some property we had never encountered before. Perhaps a natural talent ""unknown to us, but common to your world, or the result of some training at the hands of your Lesser Path master protected you against our ..tmind-reading arts.

In any event, it created something of a stir in these halls, you may be sure. Several times during your training, the question of your continuing was raised, and each time our inability to read your mind was given as reason for your termination. Each time more were willing to see you continue than not. On the whole you present a possible wealth of new knowledge and, as such, deserve every benefit of the doubt-to ensure we do not lose such a valuable addition to our storehouse of talents, of course."

"Of course," Milamber said dryly.

'yesterday the question of your continuation became critical. when time came for your final acceptance into the Assembly, the issue was put to the vote and ended in a tie. There was one abstention, myself. As long as I remain unallied with one side or the other, the question of your survival is moot. You are free to act as a full member of the Assembly until I recast my vote to ratify your selection into the assembly, or not. Our tradition does not allow a change of vote, once

cast, except abstentions. As no one absent during the voting may add their vote later, I am the only one who can break the tie. So the result of voting, no matter how long delayed, is mine to decide."

Milamber looked long and hard at the older magician. "I see." ,  
Hochopepa shook his head slowly. "I wonder if you do. To put it in its simplest form, the question of the moment is, what am I to do with you? Without meaning to, I find your life is now in my hands. what I have to decide is whether or not you should be killed. That is why I wished to see you, to see if I might have erred in judgment."

Suddenly Milamber threw back his head and laughed, long and hard. In a moment tears were running down his cheeks. when he quieted, Hochopepa said, "I fail to see the humor."

Milamber raised his hand in a placating gesture. "No offense was intended, my civilized friend. But surely you must see the irony of the situation. I was a slave, my life subject to the whim of others. For all my training, and advancement in station, I find that this fact has not been altered." He paused for a moment, and his smile was friendly. "Still, I would rather have you hold my life in your hands than my former overseer. That is what I find so funny."

Hochopepa was startled by the answer, then he, too, started to laugh.

"Many of our brothers pay little heed to the ancient teachings, you are familiar with our older philosophers, you will understand my meaning.

You seem to be a man who has found his wal. I think we have an understanding, my barbaric friend. I think we have started well."

Milamber studied Hochopepa. Without knowing the unconscious process whereby he reached the conclusion, he judged he had found an ally, and perhaps a friend. "I think so, as well. And I think you also a man who has found his wal."

Feigning modesty, Hochopepa said, "I am but a simple man, too much a slave to pleasures of the flesh to have reached such a state of perfect centering." With a sigh he leaned forward and began to speak intently. "Listen to me well, Milamber. For all the reasons enumerated before, you are as much a weapon to be feared as a possible source of knowledge.

"Tsurani are slaves to politics, as any student of the Game of the Council can attest, while we of the Assembly are reputed to be above such things, we have our own factions and infighting, not always settled in a peaceful, bloodless manner.

"Many of our brothers are little more than superstitious peasants, distrusting that which is alien and unknown. From this day forward, you must bend yourself to one task. Stay peacefully hidden within your wal, and become Tsurani. To all outward appearances, you must become more Tsurani than anyone else in the Assembly. Is that understood?"

"It is," Milamber said simply.

Hochopepa poured another cup of hot chocha each. "Be especially wary of the Warlord's pets, Elgahar and Ergoran, and a reckless youngster named Tapek. Their master rankles at the progress of the war upon your former homeworld and is suspicious of the Assembly. Now that two of our brothers died in the last major campaign, fewer of our 'ih are willing to lend further aid to that undertaking. The few magicians ~

left within his faction are overtaxed, and it is rumored he will be unable to subdue any more of your world without a miracle. It would take a united High Council-which should happen when the ThUn raiders become agriculturalists and poets, and not before-or a large number of Black Robes agreeing to do his bidding. The latter should occur about a year after the former, so you can see he is in a somewhat poor political situation. Warlords who fail in conducting war tend to fall from grace quickly." With a smile he added, "Of course, we of the Assembly are far above matters political." His tone turned serious once more. "You must face one thing: he may view you as a potential threat, either influencing others not to aid him, or openly opposing him from some deep-rooted sympathy for your former homeland. You are protected from his direct actions, but you still might run afoul of his pets. Some still blindly follow his lead."

"The path of power is a path of turns within turns," Milamber quoted.

Hochopepa nodded, a satisfied expression upon his face. His eyes seemed to glint. "That is Tsurani. You learn quickly."

in the FOLloWING weeks Milamber grew into the fullness of his new position, learning the responsibilities of his office. It was remarked on more than once, and occasionally with distrust, that there had been few who had demonstrated so much ability so soon after donning the black robe.

For all the changes in his existence, Milamber discovered many things were unchanged. With practice he discovered he still had untapped wells of power within, which could be called up only in times of stress. He studied to bring this wild augmentation of power under control, but with little success. He also discovered he was able to put aside the mental conditions placed upon him during training. He chose not to reveal this fact to anyone, not even Hochopepa. His reordering of these mental conditionings also regained him something else, a nearly overwhelming desire to be with Katala once again. He put aside that desire, to go to her at once and demand her release from the Lord of the shinzawai, well within his ability now he was a Great One. He hesitated for fear of the reaction of the other magicians, and for fear her feelings might have changed toward him. Instead he plunged into his studies. His time in the Assembly brought forth his true identity, as he had been told it would. This identity proved the key to his unusual mastery of the Greater Path. He was a being of both worlds, worlds bound together by the great rift. And for as long as those worlds stayed bound together, he drew power from both, twice the power available to others of the black robe. This knowledge revealed his true name, that name which could not be spoken lest it let another gain power over him. In the ancient Tsurani language, unused since the time of the Escape, it meant, "One who stands between worlds."

MARTIN WATCHED.

∴ Motioning silently to his companions, they slipped through the wood " just out of sight of those in the meadow. They could easily hear shouts in the Tsurani camp as orders were given. Martin crouched , so no hint of movement would betray their presence. Behind him rried Garret and the former Tsurani slave, Charles. In . the six years since the sege of Crydee, Charles had met Martin's expectations, proving his loyalty and worth a dozen times. He had also become a passable woodsman, though he would never have Garret or Martin's natural ease. Whispering, Charles said, "Huntmaster, I mark many new banners." "Where?"

∴ Charles pointed to a spot near the farthest edge of the Tsurani camp. with the aid of the dwarves remaining in the high villages, Martin and his two companions had made the dangerous climb over the Grey Towers, " easily passing the few Tsurani sentries left along the western edge of of the valley, the flank thought least in need of vigilance. Now they were within a few hundred feet of the main Tsurani camp.

Garret let forth a nearly silent whistle. "The man has eyes like a falcon. I can barely see those banners."

"Charles said, "I only know what to look for."

"What do the new banners mean?" asked Longbow.

"Ill news, Huntmaster. Those are the house banners of families that were loyal to the Blue wheel Party. At least when I was captured. They have been absent since the siege of Crydee. This can mean only another major shift in the High Council." He studied the Huntmaster's face. "It tells us the Alliance for War is again restored. And next spring we can expect a major offensive."

Martin motioned for them to move back into the woods. The trees were fully covered in fall colors, riots of red, gold, and brown. Moving quietly through fallen leaves, they found a sheltering stand of brush skirting an ancient oak and knelt behind it. Martin took out a small piece of dried beef and chewed it. The climb over the Grey Towers, even with the dwarves' help, had taken its toll: they all were hungry, tired, and dirty. "where are the new companies of soldiers?" Martin asked.

"They won't bring them through this winter. They can stage outside the City of the Plains on Kelewan, at ease in a milder climate. They'll move through the rift just before the spring thaw. By the time flowers are blooming in Princess Carlina's garden again, they'll be marching." A high-pitched keening sound came from the north. Charles's expression changed to one of controlled alarm. "Cho-ja!" He glanced around, then pointed upward.

Martin nodded and made a stirrup with his hands. He boosted first Charles, then Garret, into the oak tree. Then he jumped, and they caught his hands and pulled him up.

Moving into the higher branches, they were motionless and had weapons ready when the cho-ja patrol came into view, passing beneath the tree. Six of the antlike creatures moved at steady pace, then the leader, marked by a crested helm of Tsurani make, motioned them to halt. He turned one way then another, then made commands in their high-pitched language. The other five spread out, and for nearly ten

minutes the three men in the tree could hear them searching the area. when they returned, they quickly formed up and moved off. when Martin was certain they were out of hearing range, he whispered, "what was that?"

"They smelled us. My scent will have changed from all the Midkemian food I have eaten. They knew we were not Tsurani." Climbing down from the tree, Charles said, "Cho-ja cannot look easily upward, so they rarely do."

Garret asked, "What if some of your former countrymen had been along?"

Charles shrugged. "The cho-ja would have been speaking Tsurani. Their language is almost impossible to learn, so no one tries."

Martin said, "Will they be able to mark our trail?"

Charles said, "I don't think so, but-" He stopped as loud barking came from the Tsurani camp. "Dogs!"

Martin said, "They can track us. Come." He set out at a controlled run, back toward an ancient trail into the mountains, one almost completely overgrown and undiscovered by the Tsurani but used by Martin's band to enter the valley.

For a few moments the three men loped through the woods, listening to the barking behind. Then the sound of the dogs changed, and barks became howls and baying. "They've gotten the scent," said Garret. Martin only nodded and picked up the pace. They ran for another minute, the sound of the dogs steadily gaining on them, when Martin halted and grabbed at Garret's arm to keep him from running past. with a signal, he changed directions away from the trail and led the others to a small stream. Entering the water, he said, "I remembered hearing this when we passed by before."

The other two entered the water, and Martin said, "We gain only minutes. They'll search up- and downstream."

Garret said, "Which way?"

Martin said, "Downstream. They'll search upstream first, as that's the way out."

Garret said, "Huntmaster, there's another way." He quickly unslung his backpack and removed a large pouch. He began sprinkling powder up and down the shore of the stream where they had been. Martin felt his eyes tearing and blew hard through his nose to keep from sneezing. "Pepper!"

Garret said, "Mastercook Megar will be angry, but I thought we might need it. The cho-ja and the dogs will smell nothing for hours if they sniff around here."

Martin nodded. "Upstream!"

the three men splashed through the water, then got into a quieter rhythm. They were out of sight of the place where they entered the stream when the baying of the dogs was interrupted by sneezes. Angry voices commands, and frustrated replies were heard. Charles indulged in a faint smile as they continued to move through the water.

a branch low enough over the stream, Martin boosted his companions out and climbed up after them. They moved along the tree branch until they found another branch of a nearby oak close enough to jump , across.

they touched the ground again a dozen yards from the stream bank. Martin glanced around to ensure they were not seen and motioned for the others to follow as he led them back toward the Grey Towers.

Sea breezes swept the walls.

Arutha looked out at the town of Crydee and the sea beyond, his brown hair ruffled by the wind. Patches of light and dark flashed across the landscape as high, fluffy clouds raced overhead. Arutha watched the distant horizon, taking in the vista of the Endless Sea whipped to a froth of whitecaps, as the noise of workmen restoring another building in the town blew by on the wind. Another autumn visited Crydee, the eighth since the start of the war. Arutha considered it fortunate another spring and summer had passed without a major Tsurani offensive, still, he felt little cause for comfort. He was no longer a boy fresh to command, but a seasoned soldier. At twenty-seven years he had seen more conflict, and had made more decisions, than most men of the Kingdom knew in their lives. In his best judgment, he knew the Tsurani were slowly winning the war.

He let his mind drift a little, then shook himself out of his brooding. While no longer a moody boy, he still tended to let introspection overtake him. He found it best to keep busy and avoid such wasteful pastimes.

"it is a short autumn."

Arutha looked to his left and found Roland standing nearby. The Squire had caught the Prince lost in thought and had made his approach without detection. Arutha found himself irritated. He shrugged it off and said, "And a short winter will follow, Roland. And in the spring . . ."  
"What news of Longbow?"

Arutha balled a gloved fist and gently struck the stones of the wall, the slow, controlled gesture a clear sign of his frustration. 'I've regretted the need for his going a hundred times. Of the three, only Garret shows any sense of caution. That Charles is a Tsurani madman, consumed by honour, and Longbow is . . .'

"Longbow," finished Roland.

'I've never met a man who reveals so little of himself, Roland. If I live as long as an elf, I don't think I'll ever understand what makes him the way he is.'

Roland leaned against the cool stones of the wall and said, "Do you think they're safe?"

Arutha returned his attention to the sea. 'If any man in Crydee can crest the mountains into the Tsurani-held valley and get back, it is Martin. Still, I worry.'

roland found the admission surprising. Like Martin, Arutha was not a man to reveal what he felt. Sensing the Prince's deep trouble, roland changed the topic. "i've a message from my father, Arutha.'

"i was told there was a personal message among the

dispatches from Tulan.'

'Then you know Father's calling me home.'

'Yes. I'm sorry about the broken leg.'

'Father was never much of a rider. It's the second time he's fallen from his horse and broken something. Last time, when I was little, it was his arm.'

'it's been a long time since you were home.'

roland shrugged. 'With the war, I felt little need to return. Most of the fighting's been around here. And,' he added with a grin, "there are other reasons to stay.'

Sharing the smile, Arutha said, 'Have you told Carline yet?' roland lost his grin. "Not yet. I thought I'd wait until I'd

arranged for a ship south.' With the Brotherhood's abandonment of the Green Heart, travel by land to the south was nearly impossible, for the Tsurani had cut off the roads to Carss and Tulan.

A shout from the tower caused them to turn. 'Trackers approaching. ' Arutha squinted against the glare reflecting off the

distant sea and could make out three figures trotting easily along the road. When they were close enough to be seen clearly, Arutha said, "Longbow.' There was a note of relief in his voice. Leaving the wall, Arutha descended the steps to the

courtyard to wait for the Huntmaster and his men. roland stood by his side as the three dusty men entered the gates of the castle. Both Garret and Charles remained silent as Martin said, 'Greetings, Highness.'

"Greetings, Martin. What news?' asked the Prince.

Martin began to recount the facts unearthed at the Tsurani camp, and after a moment, Arutha cut him off.

'Better save your wind for the council, Martin. roland, go gather Father Tully, Swordmaster Fannon, and Amos Trask, and bring them to the council hall.'

roland hurried off and Arutha said, 'Charles and Garret are to come as well, Martin.'

Garret glanced at the former Tsurani slave, who shrugged.

Both knew the long-anticipated hot meal would have to wait a little longer upon the Prince's convenience.

Martin took the seat next to Amos Trask, while Charles and Garret remained standing. The former sea captain nodded a greeting to Martin, as Arutha pulled out his own

chair as was his habit, ignoring most formalities when with his councillors. Amos had become an unofficial member of Arutha's staff since the siege of the castle, he was an enterprising man of many unexpected skills.

Fannon sat to Arutha's right. Since his wound, he had been content to accept Arutha as commander in Crydee and had sent a personal note to Lord Borric advising him so. The Duke had sent a reply ratifying the transfer of command, and Fannon had returned to his former role as adjutant. The Swordmaster seemed pleased with the situation.

Arutha said, "Martin has just returned from a mission of special importance. Martin, tell us what you've seen."

Martin said, "We climbed the Grey Towers and entered the valley where the Tsurani have their headquarters."

Fannon and Tully looked at the Huntmaster with surprise, while Amos Trask guffawed. "You toss aside a small saga in one sentence," said the seaman.

Martin ignored the comment and said, "I think it best to let Charles tell you what we saw."

The former Tsurani slave's voice held a note of concern. "From all signs, the Warlord will launch another major offensive next spring."

Everyone in the room sat speechless, save Fannon. "How can you be sure? Are there new armies in his camp?"

Charles shook his head. "No, the new soldiers will not arrive until just before the first spring thaw. My former countrymen have little liking for your cold climate. They will stage during the winter months on my former homeworld. They'll move through the rift just before the offensive."

Even after five years, Fannon still had lingering doubts about Charles's loyalty, though Longbow held none. "How, then," said the Swordmaster, "can you be certain there is to be an offensive? We've had none since the assault on Elvandar three years ago."

"There are new banners in the Warlord's camp, Swordmaster, the banners of the houses who belong to the Blue Wheel Party. They have been absent for six years. It can mean only another major change within the High Council. The Alliance for War is again formed."

Of those in the room, only Tully seemed to grasp what Charles was saying. He had made a study of the Tsurani, learning all he could from the captured slaves. He said, "You had better explain, Charles."

Charles took a moment to organize his remarks and said, "You must understand one thing of my former homeland. Above everything except honor and obedience to the Emperor, there is the High Council. To gain in the High Council is worth much, even the risk of life itself.

More than one family has been destroyed by plots and intrigues within the Council. We of the Empire refer to this as the "Game of the Council".

my family was well placed within the Hunzan Clan

neither great enough to warrant notice by our clan's rivals, nor small enough to be relegated to only minor roles. We had the benefit of knowing much of the matters before the High Council without having to worry



overly much about what decisions were made. Our clan was active in the Party for Progress, for we numbered many scholars, teachers, healers, priests, and artists in our families.

'Then for a time the Hunzan Clan left the Party for Progress, for reasons not clear to any but the highest family leaders, reasons I can only speculate on. My clan joined with the clans of the Blue Wheel Party, one of the oldest in the High Council. While not so powerful as the Warlord's War Party, or the traditionalists of the Imperial Party, it still has much honour and influence.

.Six years ago, when I first came here, the Blue Wheel Party had joined with the War Party to form the Alliance for War. Those of us in the lesser families were not told why such a radical change in alignment had come about, but there was little doubt it was a matter of the Game of the Council.

my personal fall from grace and my enslavement was

certainly necessary to ensure that those of my clan would stay above suspicion until the time was right for whatever move was being planned. It is now clear what that move was.

'Since the siege of this castle, I have seen no sign of any soldier who's a member of the Blue Wheel families. I took it to mean the Alliance for War had been ended.'

Fannon interrupted. 'Are you then saying the conduct of this war is but an aspect of some political game in this High Council?'

Charles said, "Swordmaster. I know it is difficult for a man as steadfast in his loyalty to his nation as you are to understand such a thing. But that is exactly what I am saying.

'There are reasons, Tsurani reasons, for such a war. /  
Your world is rich in metals, metals we treasure on Kelewan. Also, ours is a bloody history, and all who are not of Tsuranuanni are to be feared and subjugated. If we could find your world, then might not you someday find that you could find ours?

"But more, it is a way for the Warlord to gain great influence in the High Council. For centuries we have fought the Thuril Confederation, and when we at last were forced to the treaty table, the War Party lost a great deal of power within the council. This war is a way for that lost power to be regained. The Emperor rarely commands, leaving the Warlord supreme, but the Warlord is still the Lord of a family, the Warchief of a clan, and as such is constantly seeking to gain advantage for his own people in the Game of the Council."

Tully looked fascinated. "So the Blue Wheel Party joining with the Warlord's party, then suddenly withdrawing, was but a ploy in this political

game, a maneuver to gain some advantage?"

Charles smiled. "It is very Tsurani, good Father. The Warlord planned his first campaign with great care, then three years into it finds himself with only half an army. He is overextended, unable to bring news of smashing victories to the High Council and the Emperor. He loses position and prestige in the game."

Fannon said, "Unbelievable! Hundreds of men dying for such a thing."

"Such is the way of the Game of the Council, Swordmaster. The Warlord Almecho is an ambitious man. To be Warlord one must be. He must rely on other ambitious men, many who would seek to take his mantle should he falter. To keep these men as allies rather than foemen, he must occasionally look the other way.

"In the first year of the war, the Warlord's subcommander, a man called Tasio of the Minwanabi, ordered an attack upon one of the LaMutian garrisons. Besides being second-in-command in the campaign on this world, Tasio is also the cousin of Lord Jingu of the Minwanabi. The order to attack was given to Lord Sezu of the Acoma, sworn enemy of Jingu. The Acoma soldiers were almost destroyed to a man, including Lord Sezu and his son. Tasio arrived moments too late to save the Acoma, but in time to seize the battle and bring the Warlord a victory."

Fannon's eyes were round with disbelief. "That's the blackest duplicity I have ever heard of."

Arutha said, "It's also brilliant, by these people's standards."

Charles nodded in agreement with the Prince's remark. "The Warlord would forgive Tasio getting one of his better commanders slaughtered and losing the entire Acoma army, in exchange for a victory and strengthened support by the Minwanabi.

"Any Ruling Lord who had no direct stake in the game would applaud the move as a masterstroke, even those who admired Lord Sezu. It gained Almecho and Lord Jingu many allies in the council. So the Warlord's political opponents, needing to devise a way to counter his growing power, created the situation I described, overextending the Warlord and leaving him unable to prosecute this war. Many families hovering near the edge of the War Party would then be drawn to the Blue Wheel and their allies for delivering such a stunning blow."

Arutha said, "But the important fact for us is that this Blue Wheel is once more allied with the Warlord, and their soldiers will be rejoining the war come spring."

Charles looked at those in the council hall. "I cannot begin to guess why there has once again been a realignment in the council. I am too far from the game. But as His Highness has said, what is important for those of us here in Crydee to know is that as many as ten thousand fresh soldiers may come against one of the fronts in the Spring."

Amos scowled. "That's a backbreaker, for certain."

Arutha unfolded a half-dozen parchments. "Over the last few months, most of you have read these messages." He looked at Tully and Fannon. "You've seen the pattern begin to emerge." He picked up one parchment. "From

Father: 'Constant Tsurani sorties and raids keep our men in a state of unease. Our inability to close with the enemy has lent a dark aspect to all we do. I fear we shall never see an end to this business . . .'" From Baron Bellamy: ". increased Tsurani activity near the Jonril garrison. I

deem it advisable to increase our commitment there this winter, while the Tsurani are normally inactive, lest we lose that position next spring." Squire Roland will be supervising a joint reinforcement from Carss and Tulan at Jonril this winter.'

Several in the room glanced at Roland, who stood near Arutha's shoulder. The Prince continued. "From Lord Dulanic, Knight-Marshal of Krondor: "While His Highness shares your concern, there is little to indicate the need for alarm. Unless some intelligence can be produced to give credence to your fears of possible future Tsurani offensives, I have advised the Prince of Krondor to refuse your request for elements of the Krondorian garrison to be sent to the Far Coast . . ." Arutha looked around the room. 'Now the pattern is clear.'

Setting aside the parchments, Arutha pointed at the map affixed to the tabletop. 'We have committed every available soldier. We dare not pull men from the south for fear of the Tsurani moving against Jonril. With the garrison strengthened, we will have a stable situation

down there for a while. Should the enemy attack the garrison, it can be reinforced from Carss and Tulan.

Should the enemy move against either castle, they leave

Jonril at their back. But all that will fail should we strip those garrisons. 'And Father is committed to a long front and has no

men to spare.' He looked at Charles. "Where would you expect the attack to come?"

The former Tsurani slave looked over the map, then shrugged. 'It's difficult to say, Highness. Should the situation be decided solely upon military merits, the Warlord should attack against the weaker front, either toward the elves, or here. But little done in the Empire is free of political considerations.' He studied troop dispositions on the map, then said, "Were I the Warlord, in need of a simple victory to bolster my position in the High Council, I would attack Crydee once more. But were I the Warlord and my position in the High Council precarious, in need of a bold stroke to regain lost prestige, I might risk an all-out offensive against the main force of the Kingdom, those armies under Duke Borric's command. To crush the main strength of the Kingdom would give him dominance within the council for years to come." Fannon leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Then we are faced with

the possibility of another assault upon Crydee this spring without recourse to reinforcements for fear of attack elsewhere." He indicated the map with a sweep of his hand. "Now we face the same problem as the Duke. All our forces are committed along the Tsurani front. The only men we have available are those in the towns on leave, only a small part of the whole.

"We can't maintain the army in the field indefinitely, even Lords Borric and Brucal winter in LaMut with the Earl, leaving small companies to guard the Tsurani." Waving his hand in the air, he said, "I digress. What is important is to notify your father at once, Arutha, of the possibility of attack. Then should the Tsurani hit his lines, he'll be back from LaMut early, in position and ready. Even should the Tsurani bring ten thousand fresh troops, he can call up more soldiers from the outlying garrisons in Yabon, fully another two thousand." Amos said, "Two thousand against ten thousand sounds poor odds, Swordmaster."

Fannon was inclined to agree. "We do all we can. There are no guarantees it will be enough."

Charles said, "At least they will be horse soldiers, Swordmaster. My former comrades still have little liking for horses."

Fannon nodded agreement. "But even so, it is a bleak picture."

"There is one thing," said Arutha, holding up a parchment. "The message from Lord Dulanic stated the need for intelligence to give credence to our request for aid. We now have enough intelligence to satisfy him, I think."

Fannon said, "Even a small portion of the Krondorian garrison here would give us the strength to resist an offensive. Still, it is late in the season, and a message would have to be dispatched at once."

"That's the gods' truth," said Amos. "If you left this afternoon, you'd barely clear the Straits of darkness before winter shuts them off. In another two weeks it'd be a close thing."

Arutha said, "I have given the matter some thought. I think there is enough need to risk my going to Krondor."

Fanon sat up straight in his chair. "But you're the commander of the Duchy's army, Arutha. You can't 'abandon that responsibility.'

Arutha smiled. 'I can and I will. I know you have no wish to resume command here once more, but resume command you will. If we are to win support from Erland, I must convince him myself. When Father first carried word of the Tsurani to Erland and the King, I learned the advantage of speaking in person. Erland's a cautious man. I will need every persuasion I can bring to bear.'

Amos snorted. "And how do you plan on reaching Krondor, begging Your Highness's pardon? There's the better part of three Tsurani armies between here and the Free Cities should you go overland. And there are only a few luggers fit for coasting in the harbour, and you'd need a deep-water ship for a sea journey.' The Wind of Dawn is still a deep-water ship, Amos.

Amos's mouth dropped open. 'The Wind of Dawn?' he

cried in disbelief. 'Beside the fact she's little better than a lugger herself she's laid up for the winter. I heald her over her broken keelson when the muddlecaptain crying headed fool came limping into harbour a month ago. She needs to be hauled out, have the keel inspected and the keelson replaced. Without repair her keel's too weak to take the pounding she'll get from the winter storms. You might as wel stick your head in a rain barrel, begging Your Highness's pardon. You'd still drown, but you'd save a lot of other people a great deal of trouble.'

Fannon looked incensed at the seaman's remarks, but Tully, Martin, roland, and Arutha only looked amused. 'When I sent Martin out,' said Arutha, "I considered the possibility I might need a ship for Krondor. I ordered her repaired two weeks ago. There's a swarm of shipwrights aboard her now.' He fixed Amos with a questioning look. 'Of course I've been told it won't be as good a job as if they'd hauled her out, but it will serve.'

"Aye, for potting up and down the coast in the light winds of spring, perhaps. But you're talking about winter storms, and you're talking about running the Straits of Darkness.' Arutha said, "Well, she will have to do. I'm leaving in a few days' time. Someone must convince Erland we need aid, and I have to be the one.'

Amos refused to let the subject drop. 'And has Oscar Danteen agreed to captain the ship through the straits for you?'

Arutha said, "I've not told him our destination as yet."

Amos shook his head. "As I thought. That man's got the heart of a shark, which is to say none, and the courage of a jellyfish, which is also to say none. Soon as you give the order, he'll cut your throat, drop you over the side, winter with the pirates of the Sunset Islands, then head straight for the Free Cities come spring. He'll then have some Natalese scribe pen a most grieving and flowery message to your father, describing your valor just before you were lost overboard in high seas while fighting pirates. Then he'll spend a year drinking up the gold you gave him for passage."

Arutha said, "But I purchased his ship. I'm ship's master now."

Amos said, "Owner or not, Prince or not, aboard ship there is but one master, the captain. He is King and High Priest, and no man tells him what to do, save when a harbor pilot's aboard, and then only with respect. No, Highness, you'll not survive this journey with Oscar Danteen on the quarterdeck."

Faint lines of mirth began to crinkle at the corners of Arutha's eyes.

"Have you another suggestion, Captain?"

Amos sighed as he sank back into his chair. "I've been hooked, I might as well be gutted and cleaned. Send word to Danteen to clear out the captain's cabin and discharge the crew. I'll see to getting a replacement crew for that band of cutthroats, though there's mostly drunkards and boys left in port this time of year. And for the love of the gods, don't mention to anyone where we're bound. If so much as one of those drink-besotted scoundrels learns you mean to risk the Straits of Darkness this late in the season, you'll have to turn out the garrison to

comb the woods for deserters."

Arutha said, "Very well. I'll leave all preparations to you. We depart as soon as you judge the ship ready." He said to Longbow, "I'll want you to come as well, Huntmaster."

Longbow looked a little surprised. "Me, Highness?"

"I'll want an eyewitness for Lord Dulanic and the Prince."

Martin frowned, but after a moment said, "I've never been to Krondor, Highness." He smiled his crooked smile. "I may never have the chance again."

AMos TRASK'S VOICE cut through the shriek of the wind. Gusts from the sea carried his words to a confused-looking lad aloft. "No, you warped-brained landlubber, don't pull the sheets so damn tight. They'll be humming like a lute string. They don't pull the ship, the mast does. The lines help when the wind changes quarter.' He watched as the boy adjusted the sheets. 'Yes, that's it, no, that's too loose.' He swore loudly. "Now, there you have it! He looked disgusted as Arutha came up the gangway. 'Fishing boys who want to be sailors. And drunkards. And a few of Danteen's rogues I had to rehire. This is some crew, Highness.'

"Will they serve?"

"They'd bloody well better, or they'll answer to me.' He

watched with a critical eye as the sailors crawled over the spars aloft, checking every knot and splice, every line and sheet. 'We need thirty good men. I can count on eight. The rest? I mean to put in to Carss as well as Tulan on the way down. Maybe then we can replace the boys and less dependable men with experienced seamen.'

'What of the delay clearing the straits?'

'if we were there today, we would manage. By the time we get there a dependable crew will prove more important than arriving a week earlier. The season will be full upon us.' He studied Arutha. "do you know why the passage is called the Straits of Darkness?'

Arutha shrugged. Amos said, "It's no simple sailor's superstition. It's a description of what you find there.' He got a far-off look as he said, "Now, I can tell you about the different currents from the Endless Sea and Bitter Sea that come together there, or about the changing, crazy tides of winter when the moons are all in the worst possible aspect in the heavens, or how winds come sweeping down from the north, blowing snow so thick you can't see the decks from the yards. But then . . . There are no words to describe the straits in winter. It is one, two, three days travelling blind. And if the prevailing wind's not blowing you back into the Endless Sea, then it's blowing you to the southern rocks. Or there's no wind, and fog blots out everything as the currents turn you around.'

'You paint a bleak picture, Captain,' said Arutha with a grim smile.

'Only the truth. You're a young man of uncommonly practical wits and cold nerve, Highness. I've seen you stand when many men of greater experience would have broken and run. I'm not trying to put any scare upon you. I simply wish you to understand what you propose to do. If any can clear the straits in winter in this bucket, it is Amos Trask, and that's no idle boast. I've cut the season so fine before, there's little to tell between autumn and winter, winter and spring. But I would also tell you this: before leaving Crydee, say tender good-byes to your sister, write your father and brother, and leave any testaments and legacies in order.'

Without changing expression, Arutha said, "The letters and legacies are written, and Carline and I dine alone tonight."

Amos nodded. "We'll leave on the morning tide. This ship's a slabsided, wattle-bottomed, water-rotted coaster, Highness, but she'll make it through if I have to pick her up and carry her."

Arutha took his leave, and when he was out of sight, Amos turned his attention heavenward. "Astalon," he invoked the god of justice, "I'm a sinner, it's true. But if you had to measure out justice, did it have to be this?" Now at peace with his fate, Amos returned to the business of seeing everything in order.

CARLINE WALKED IN the garden, the withering blooms reflecting her own sad mood. Roland watched her from a short way off, trying to find words of comfort. Finally he said, "I will be Baron of Tulan someday. It is over nine years since I've been home. I must go down the coast with Arutha."

Softly she said, "I know."

He saw the resignation on her face and crossed to hold her. "You will be Baroness there someday, also."

She hugged him tightly, then stepped away, forcing herself to speak lightly. "Still, you'd think after all these years your father would have learned to do without you."

He smiled. "He was to have wintered in Jonril with Baron Bellamy, overseeing the enlargement of the garrison. I will go in his stead. My brothers are all too young. With the Tsurani dug in for the winter, it is our only chance to expand the fort."

With forced levity she said, "At least I won't have to worry about your breaking the hearts of the ladies of your father's court."

He laughed. "Little chance of that. Supplies and men are already assembling and the barges ready to travel up the river Wyndermee. After Amos puts me ashore in Tulan, I'll spend one or two days at home no more, then off I go. It will be a long winter in Jonril with no one for company but soldiers and a few farmers in that gods-forsaken fort."

Carline covered her mouth as she giggled. "I hope your father doesn't discover you've gambled away his barony to the soldiers come spring." Roland smiled at her. "I'll miss you."

Carline took his hands in hers. "And I you."

They stood in tableau for a time, then suddenly Carline's facade of bravery cracked, and she was in his arms. "Don't let anything happen. I couldn't bear losing you."

'I know,' he said gently. "But you must continue to put on a brave face for others. Fannon will need your help in conducting court, and you will have the responsibility for the entire household. You are mistress of Crydee, and many people will depend upon your guidance.'

They watched the banners on the walls snapping in the late afternoon wind. The air was harsh and he drew his cloak about them. Trembling, she said, 'Come back to me, Roland.'

Softly he said, 'I'll come back, Carline.' He tried to shake a cold, icy feeling that had risen within, but could not.

They stood on the dock, in the darkness of morning before the sunrise. Arutha and Roland waited by the gangway.

Arutha said, 'Take care of everything, Swordmaster.'

Fannon stood with his hand upon his sword, still proud and erect despite advancing years. "I will, Highness.'

With a slight smile, Arutha said, 'And when Cardan and Algon return from patrol, instruct them to take care of you.'

Fannon's eyes blazed as he shot back. "Insolent pup. I can best any man of the castle, save your father. Step down from the gangway and draw your sword and I'll show you why I still wear the badge of Swordmaster.'

Arutha held his hands up in mock supplication. 'Fannon, it is good to see such sparks again. Crydee is well protected by her Swordmaster.'

Fannon stepped forward and placed his hand upon Arutha's shoulder. 'Take care, Arutha. You were always my best student. I should hate to lose you.'

Arutha smiled fondly at his old teacher. 'My thanks, Fannon.' Then his manner turned wry. 'I would hate to lose me, also. I'll be back - And I'll have Erland's soldiers with me.' Arutha and Roland sprang up the gangway, while those

on the dock waved good-bye. Martin Longbow waited at the rail, watching as the gangway was removed and the men upon the quay cast off lines. Amos Trask shouted orders and sails were lowered. Slowly the ship moved away from the quayside into the harbour. Arutha watched silently, with Roland and Martin beside, as the docks fell behind. Roland said, 'I was glad the Princess chose not to come. One more good-bye would be more than I could manage.' 'I understand,' said Arutha. "She cares for you greatly, Squire, though I can't see why." Roland looked to see if the Prince was joking, and found Arutha smiling faintly. 'I've not spoken of it,' the Prince continued. "But since we may



not see each other for some time after you leave us in Tulan, you should know that when the opportunity comes for you to speak to Father, you'll have my word on your behalf."  
"Thank you, Arutha."

The town slipped by in darkness, replaced by the causeway to the lighthouse. The false dawn pierced the gloom slightly, casting everything into greys and blacks. Then after some time the large upthrust form of the Guardian Rocks appeared off the starboard quarter. Amos ordered the helm put over, and they turned southwestward, more sails set to bring them full before the wind. The ship picked up speed, and Arutha could hear gulls crying overhead. Suddenly he was struck with the knowledge they were now out of Crydee. He felt chilled and gathered his cloak tightly around him.

Arutha sTOOD ON the quarterdeck, sword held ready, Martin to one side notching an arrow to his bowstring. Amos Trask and his first mate, Vasco, also had weapons drawn. Six angry-looking seamen were assembled upon the deck below, while the rest of the crew watched the confrontation.

One sailor shouted from the deck, "You've lied to us, Captain. You've not put back north for Crydee as you said in Tulan. Unless you mean for us to sail on to Keshian Elarial, there's nothing south save the straits. Do you mean to pass the Straits of Darkness?"

Amos roared, "Damn you, man. Do you question my orders?"

"Aye, Captain. Tradition holds there's no valid compact between captain and crew to sail the straits in winter, save by agreement. You lied to us, and we're not obliged to sail with you."

Arutha heard Amos mutter, "A bloody sea-lawyer." To the sailor he said, "Very well," and handed his cutlass to Vasco. Descending the ladder to the main deck, he approached the seaman with a friendly smile upon his face.

"Look, lads," he began as he reached the six recalcitrant sailors, all holding belaying pins or marlinespikes. "I'll be honest with you. The Prince must reach Krondor, or there'll be hell to pay come spring. The Tsurani gather a large force, which may come against Crydee." He placed his hand upon the shoulder of the sailors' spokesman and said, "So what it comes down to is this: we must sail to Krondor." With a sudden motion Amos had his arm around the man's neck. He ran to the side of the ship and heaved the helpless sailor over. "If you don't wish to come along," he shouted, "you can swim back to Tulan!"

Another sailor started to move toward Amos when an arrow struck the deck at his feet. He looked up and saw Martin taking a bead upon him. The Huntmaster said, "I wouldn't."

The man dropped his marlinespike and stepped back. Amos turned to face the sailors. "By the time I reach the quarterdeck, you had better be in the rigging-or over the side, it makes no difference to me. Any man not working will be hanged for the mutinous dog he is."

The faint cries for help of the man in the water could be heard as Amos returned to the quarterdeck. To Vasco he said, "Toss that fool a rope, and if he doesn't relent, pitch him overboard again." Amos shouted, "Set all sails! Make for the Straits of Darkness."

Arutha BLINKED SEAWATER out of his eyes and held on to the guide rope with all the strength he possessed. Another wave crashed over the side of the ship, and he was blinded once more. Strong hands grabbed him from behind, and in the darkness he heard Martin's voice. "Are you all right?"

Spitting water, he shouted, "Yes," and continued to make his way toward the quarterdeck, Martin close behind. The Wind of Dawn pitched and rolled beneath his feet, and he slipped twice before he reached the ladder. The entire ship had been rigged with safety lines, for in the rough sea it was impossible to keep a footing without something to hang on to.

Arutha pulled himself up the ladder to the quarterdeck and stumbled as much as walked to Amos Trask. The captain waited beside the helmsman, lending his weight to the large tiller when needed. He stood as if rooted to the wood of the deck, feet wide apart, weight shifting with each move of the ship, his eyes peering into the gloom above. He watched, listened, each sense tuned to the ship's rhythm. Arutha knew he had not slept for two days and a night, and most of this night as well. "How much longer?" Arutha shouted.

"One, two days, who can say?" A snap from above sounded like cracking spring ice upon the river Crydee. "Hard aport!" Amos shouted, leaning heavily into the tiller. When the ship heded, he shouted to Arutha, "Another day of these gods-cursed winds buffeting this ship, and we'll be lucky if we can turn and run back to Tulan."

They were nine days out of Tulan, the last three spent in the storm. The ship had been relentlessly pounded by waves and wind, and Amos had been in the hold three times, inspecting the repairs to the keelson. Amos judged them due west of the straits, but couldn't be sure until the storm passed. Another wave struck the ship, and it shuddered.

"Weather break!" came the shout from above.

"Where away?" cried Amos.

"Dead starboard!"

"Come about!" ordered Amos, and the helmsman leaned against the tiller.

Arutha strained his eyes against the stinging salt spray and saw a faint glow seem to swing about until it stood off the bow. Then it grew larger as they drove for the thinning weather. As if walking out of a dark room, they moved from gloom to light. The heavens seemed to open above them, and they could see grey skies. The waves still ran high, but Arutha sensed the weather had turned at last. He looked over his shoulder and saw the black mass of the storm as it moved away from them.

Moment by moment the combers subsided, and after the raging clamor of the storm, the sea seemed suddenly silent. The sky was quickly brightening, and Amos said, "It's morning. I must have lost track of time. I thought it still night."

Arutha watched the receding storm and could see it clearly outlined, a churning mass of darkness against the lighter grey of the sky above. The grey quickly turned to slate, then blue-grey as the morning sun broke through the storm. For the better part of an hour Arutha watched

the spectacle, while Amos ordered his men about their tasks, sending the night watch below and the day watch above.

The storm raced eastward, leaving a choppy sea behind. Time seemed frozen as Arutha stood in awe of the scene on the horizon. A portion of the storm seemed to have stopped, between distant fingers of land. Great spouts of water spun between the boundaries of the narrow passage in the distance. It looked as if a mass of dark, boiling clouds had been trapped within that area by a supernatural force.

"The Straits of Darkness," said Amos Trask at his shoulder.

"When do we put through them?" Arutha asked quietly.

"Now," answered Amos. The captain turned and shouted, "Day watch aloft! Midwatch turn to and stand ready! Helmsman, set course due east!"

Men scrambled into the rigging, while others came from below, still haggard and showing little benefit from the few hours' sleep since they last stood watch. Arutha pulled back the hood of his cloak and felt the cold sting of the wind against his wet scalp. Amos gripped him by the arm and said, "We could wait for weeks and not have the wind favorable again. That storm was a blessing in disguise, for it will give us a bold start through."

Arutha watched in fascination as they headed for the straits.

Some freak of weather and current had created the conditions that held the straits in water-shrouded gloom all winter. In fair weather the straits were a difficult passage, for though they appeared wide at most points, dangerous rocks were hidden just below the water in many critical places. In foul weather they were considered impossible for most captains to negotiate. Sheets of water or flurries of snow blown down from the Grey Towers tried to fall, only to be caught by blasts of wind and tossed back upward again, to try to fall once more. Waterspouts suddenly erupted upward to spin madly for minutes, then dissolve into blinding cascades. Ragged bolts of lightning cracked and were followed by booming thunder as all the fury of colliding weather fronts was unleashed. Currents from two seas met and swirled about, creating sudden shifts and eddies that could turn a ship unexpectedly.

"The sea's running high," yelled Amos. "That's good."

"We'll have more room to clear the rocks and we'll be through or dashed to pieces in short order. If the wind holds we'll be through before the day is done."

"What if the winds change?"

"That is not something to dwell on!"

They raced forward, attacking the edge of the swirling weather inside the straits. The ship shuddered as if reluctant once again to face foul weather. Arutha gripped the rail tightly as the ship began to buck and lurch. Amos picked his way along, avoiding the sudden wayward gusts, keeping the ship in the westerly trail of the

passed storm.

All light disappeared. The ship was illuminated only by the dancing light of the storm lanterns, casting flickering yellow darts into murk. The distant booming of waves upon rocks reverberated from all quarters, confusing the senses.

Amos shouted to Arutha, "We'll keep to the center of the passage, if we slip to one side or the other, or get turned, we'll stave in the hull on rocks." Arutha nodded, as the captain shouted directions to his crew.

Arutha fought his way to the forward rail of the quarterdeck and shouted Martin's name. The Huntmaster answered from the main deck that he was well, though waterlogged. Arutha held tight to the rail as the ship dipped low into a trough and then started to rise as it climbed a crest. For what seemed minutes the ship strained upward, climbing and climbing, then suddenly water swept over the bow and they were heading downward again. The rail became his only contact with a tilting World amid a cold, wet chaos. Arutha's hands ached from the effort of hanging on.

Hours passed in cacophonous fury, while Amos commanded his crew to answer every challenge of wind and tide. Occasionally the darkness was punctuated by a blinding flash of lightning, bringing every detail into sharp focus, leaving dazzling afterimages in the darkness.

In a sudden lurch, the ship seemed to slip sideways, and Arutha felt his feet go out from under him as the ship heeled over. He held to the rail with all his strength, his ears deafened by a monstrous grinding. The ship righted itself, and Arutha pulled himself around to see, in the flickering glow of the storm lanterns, the tiller swinging wildly back and forth and the helmsman slumped down upon the deck, his face darkened by blood flowing from his open mouth. Amos was desperately scrambling upright, reaching for the lashing tiller. Risking broken ribs as he seized it, he fought desperately to hang on and bring the ship back under control.

Arutha half stumbled to the tiller and threw his weight against it. A long, low grinding sound came from the starboard side, and the ship shuddered.

"Turn, you motherless bitch!" cried Amos as he heaved against the tiller, marshaling what strength he had left. Arutha felt his muscles protesting in pain as he strained against the seemingly immobile tiller. Slowly it moved, first an inch, then another. The grinding rose in volume, until Arutha's ears rang from the sound of it.

Suddenly the tiller swung free once more. Arutha overbalanced and went flying across the deck. He struck the hard wood and slid along the wet surface until he crashed into the bulwark, gasping as wind exploded from his lungs. A wave drenched him and he spluttered, spitting out a lungful of seawater. Groggily he pulled himself up and staggered back to the tiller.

In the faint light Amos's face was white from exertion, but it was set in a wide-eyed, manic expression as he laughed. "Thought you'd gone over the side for a moment."

Arutha leaned into the tiller, and together they forced it to move once more. Amos's mad laughter rang out, and Arutha said, "what's so damn funny?"

"Look!"

Panting, Arutha looked where Amos indicated. In the darkness he saw huge forms rearing up alongside the ship, blacker shapes against the blackness. Amos yelled, "We're clearing the Great South Rocks. Pull, Prince of Crydee! Pull if you wish to ever see dry land again!"

Arutha hauled upon the tiller, forcing the balky ship away from the terrible stone embrace mere yards away. Again they felt the ship shudder as another low grinding sound came from below. Amos whooped.

~'If this barge has a bottom when we're through, I'll be amazed."

Arutha felt a gut-wrenching stab of panic, followed immediately by a strange exultation. He found himself seized by a nameless, almost joyous feeling as he struggled to hold the ship on course. He heard a strange sound amid the cacophony and discovered he was laughing with Amos, laughing at the fury erupting around him. There was nothing left to fear. He would endure or he wouldn't. It didn't matter now. All he could do was give himself over to one task, keeping the ship heading past the jagged rocks. Every fiber of his being laughed in terror, in joy at being reduced to this lower level of existence, this primal state of being. Nothing existed save the need to do this one thing, upon which all was wagered.

Arutha entered a new state of awareness. Seconds, minutes, hours lost all meaning. He struggled, with Amos, to keep the ship under control, but his senses recorded everything around him in minute detail. He could feel the grain of the wood through the wet leather of his gloves. , " The fabric of his stockings was gathered between his toes in his water' soaked boots. The wind smelled of salt and pitch, wet wool caps, and raindrenched canvas. Every groan of timber, smack of rope against wood, and shout of men above could be clearly heard. Upon his face he shout of

men above could be clearly heard. Upon his face he felt the wind and cold touch of melting snow and seawater, and he laughed. Never had he felt so close to death, and never had he felt more alive. Muscles bunched and he pitted himself against forces primeval and formidable. On and on they plunged, deeper and deeper into the madness of the Straits of Darkness.

Arutha heard Amos as he shouted orders, orchestrating every man's move by the second. He played his ship as a master musician played a lute, sensing each vibration and sound, striving for that harmony of motion which kept the Wind of Dawn moving safely through perilous seas. The crew answered his every demand instantly, risking death in the treacherous rigging, for they knew their safe passage rested solely upon his skill.

Then it was over. One moment they were fighting with mad strength to clear the rocks and pass through the fury of the straits, the next they were running before a stiff breeze with the darkness behind.

Ahead the sky was overcast, but the storm that had held them for days was a distant gloom upon the eastern horizon. Arutha looked at his hands, as if at things apart, and willed them to release their hold upon the tiller. Sailors caught him as he collapsed, and lowered him to the deck. For a time his senses reeled, then he saw Amos sitting a short way off as Vasco took the tiller. Amos's face was still mirthful as he said, 'We did it, boy. We're in the Bitter Sea.'

Arutha looked about. 'Why is it still so dark?'

Amos laughed. 'It's nearly sundown. We were on that tiller for hours.'

Arutha began to laugh too. Never had he felt such triumph. He laughed until tears of exhaustion ran down his face, until his sides hurt.

Amos half crawled to his side. "You know what it is to laugh at death, Arutha. You'll never be the same man again."

Arutha caught his breath. "I thought you mad there for a time."

Amos took a wineskin a sailor handed him and drew a deep drink. He passed it to Arutha and said, "Aye, as you were. It is something only a few know in their lives. It is a vision of something so clear, so true, it can only be a madness. You see what life is worth, and you know what death means."

Arutha looked up at the sailor standing by them, and saw it was the man Amos had pitched over the rail to head off the mutiny. Vasco threw the man a frown as he watched, but the man- didn't move. Amos looked up at him, and the seaman said, "Captain, I just wanted to say I was wrong. Thirteen years a sailor, and I'd have wagered my soul to lims-Kragma no master could pilot a ship such as this through the straits." Lowering his eyes, he said, "I'd willingly stand for flogging for what I done, Captain. But after, I'd sail to the Seven Lower Hells with you, and so would any man here."

Arutha looked about and saw other sailors gathering upon the quarterdeck or looking down from the rigging. Shouts of "Aye, Captain," and "He has the truth of it" could be heard.

Amos pulled himself up, gripping the rail of the ship, his legs wobbling a little. He surveyed the men gathered around, then shouted, "Night watch above! Midwatch and day watch stand down." He turned to Vasco. "Check below for damage to the hull, then open the galley. Set course for Krondor."

ARUTHA CAME AWAKE in his cabin. Martin Longbow was sitting by his side.

"Here." The Huntmaster held out a steaming mug of broth.

Arutha levered himself up on his elbow, his bruised and tired body protesting. He sipped at the hot broth. "How long was I asleep?"

"You fell asleep on deck last night, just after sundown. Or passed out, if you want the truth. It's three hours after sunrise."

"The weather?"

"Fair, or at least not storming. Amos is back on deck. He thinks it might hold most of the way. The damage below is not too bad, we'll be all right if we don't have to withstand another gale. Even so, Amos says

there are a few fair anchorages to be found along the Keshian coast should the need arise."

Arutha pulled himself out of his bunk, put on his cloak, and went up on deck. Martin followed. Amos stood by the tiller, his eyes studying the way the sail held the wind. He lowered his gaze to watch as Arutha and Martin climbed the ladder to the quarterdeck. For a moment he studied the pair, as if struck by some thought or another, then smiled as Arutha asked, "How do we fare?"

Amos said, "We've a broad reach to the winds; had it since we cleared the straits. If it holds from the northwest, we should reach Krondor quickly enough. But winds rarely do hold, so we may take a bit longer."

A lookout shouted, "Sail ho!"

"Where away?" shouted Amos.

"Two points abaft port!"

Amos studied the horizon, and soon three tiny white specks appeared.

To the lookout he shouted, "What ships?"

"Galleys, Captain!"

Amos mused aloud. "Quegan. This is a bit south for their usual patrols if they're warships, and I don't think it likely they're merchantmen."

He ordered more canvas on the yards. "If the wind holds, we'll be past before they can close. They're flat-bottomed tubs under sail, and their rowers can't maintain speed over this distance."

Arutha watched in fascination as the ships grew on the horizon. The closest galley turned to cut them off, and after a while he could make out the hulking outline of the galley, its majestic sails above a high fore and aft deck. Arutha could see the sweep of oars, three banks per side. The captain attempted a short burst of speed. But Amos was right, and the galley was falling away behind. As the distance between the Wind of Dawn and the galleys slowly increased, Arutha said, "They're flying the Royal Quegan standard. What would Quegan war galleys be doing this far south?"

"The gods only know," said Amos. "Could be they're out looking for pirates, or they could be keeping an eye out for Keshian ships straying. It's hard to guess. Queg treats the whole of the Bitter Sea as her territory, I'd as soon avoid finding out what they're up to as not."

The rest of the day passed uneventfully and Arutha enjoyed a sense of respite after the dangers of the last few days. The night brought a clear display of stars, he spent several hours on deck studying the bright array in the heavens. Martin came on deck and found him looking upward. Arutha heard the arrival of the Huntmaster and said, "Kulgan and Tully say the stars are suns much like our own, made small by vast distances."

Martin said, "An incredible thought, but I think they are right." "Have you wondered if one of those is where the

Tsurani homeworld lies?"

Martin leaned upon the rail. "Many times, Highness.

In the hills you can see the stars like this, after the campfires are out.

Undimmed by lights from town or keep, they blaze across the sky. I also have wondered if one of them might be where our enemies live. Charles has told me their sun is brighter than ours, and their world hotter."

"It seems impossible. To make war across such a void defies all logic."

They stood quietly together watching the glory of the night, ignoring the bite of the crisp wind that carried them to Krondor. Footfalls behind caused them to turn as one, and Amos Trask appeared. He hesitated a moment, studying the two faces before him, then joined them at the rail. "Stargazing, is it?"

The others said nothing, and Trask watched the wake of the ship, then the sky. "There is no place like the sea, gentlemen. Those who live on land all their lives can never truly understand. The sea is basic, sometimes cruel, sometimes gentle, and never predictable. But it is nights like this that make me thankful the gods allowed me to be a sailor."

Arutha said, "And something of a philosopher as well."

Amos chuckled. "Take any deep-water sailor who's faced death at sea as many times as I have, and scratch him lightly. Underneath you'll find a philosopher, Highness. No fancy words, I'll warrant you, but a deep abiding sense of his place in the world. The oldest known sailor's prayer is to Ishap. 'Ishap, thy sea is great and my boat is small; have mercy on me.' That sums it up."

Martin spoke quietly, almost to himself. "When I was a boy, among the great trees, I knew such feelings. To stand by a bole so ancient it is older than the oldest living memory of man gives such a sense of place in the world."

Arutha stretched. "It is late. I shall bid you both a good night." As he started to leave, he seemed taken by some thought. "I am not given to your philosophies, but . . . I am pleased to have shared this voyage with you both."

After he was gone, Martin watched the stars for a time, then became aware Amos was studying him. He faced the seaman and said, "You seem taken by some thought, Amos."

"Aye, Master Longbow." Leaning against the rail, he said, "Nearly seven full years have passed since I came to Crydee. Something has tickled my mind since first meeting you."

"What is that, Amos?"

"You're a man of mysteries, Martin. There're many things in my own life I'd not wish re-counted now, but with you it's something else."

Martin appeared indifferent to the course of conversation, but his eyes narrowed slightly. "There's little about me not well known in Crydee."

"True, but it is that little which troubles me."

"Put your mind at ease, Amos. I am the Duke's Huntmaster, nothing more."

Quietly Amos said, "I think more, Martin. In my travels through the town, overseeing the rebuilding, I've met a lot of people, and in seven years I've heard a lot of gossip about you. Some time back I put the pieces together and came up with an answer. It explains why I see your manner change-only a little, but enough to notice-when you're around Arutha, and especially when you're around the Princess."



Martin laughed. "You spin an old and tired bard's tale, Amos. You think I am the poor hunter desperate for love of a young Princess? You think me in love with Carline?"

Amos said, "No, though I have no doubt you love her. As much as any brother loves his sister."

Martin had his belt knife half out when Amos's hand caught his wrist. The thickset seaman held the hunter's wrist in a viselike grip, and Martin could not move his arm. "Stay your anger, Martin. I'd not like to have to pitch you over the side to cool you off."

Martin ceased his struggling against Amos and released his knife, letting it slide back into its sheath. Amos held the hunter's wrist a moment longer, then let go. After a moment Martin said, "She has no knowledge, nor do her brothers. Until this time I thought only the Duke and one or two others might know. How did you learn of it?"

Amos said, "It was not hard. People most often don't see what is right before them." Amos turned and watched

the sails above, absently checking each detail of the ship's crew as he spoke. "I've seen the Duke's likeness in the great hall. Should you grow a beard like his, the resemblance would shout for the world to see. All in the castle remark how Arutha grows to resemble his mother less and father more each passing year, and I've been nagged since we first met why no one else noticed he resembles you as well. I expect they don't notice because they choose not to. It explains so much: why you were granted special favour by the Duke in placing you with the old Huntmaster, and why you were chosen Huntmaster when a new one was needed. For some time now I've suspected, but tonight I was certain. When I came up from the lower deck and you both turned in the darkness, for a moment I couldn't tell which of you was which."

Martin spoke with no emotion, just a statement of fact.

"It's your life should you breathe a word of it to anyone."

Amos settled himself against the rail. "I'm a bad man to threaten, Martin Longbow."

"It is a matter of honor."

Amos crossed his arms over his chest. "Lord Borric is not the first noble to father a bastard, nor will he be the last. Many are even given offices and rank. How is the Duke of Crydee's honor endangered?"

Martin gripped the rail, standing like a statue in the night. His words seemed to come from a great distance. "Not his honor, Captain. Mine."

He faced Amos, and in the night his eyes seemed alive with inner light as they reflected the lantern hung behind the seaman. "The Duke knows of my birth, and for his own reasons chose to bring me to Crydee when I was still little more than a boy. I am sure Father Tully has been told, for he stands highest in the Duke's trust, and possibly Kulgan as well. But none of them suspect I know. They think me ignorant of my heritage."

Amos stroked his beard. "A knotty problem, Martin. Secrets within secrets, and such. Well, you have my word-from friendship, not from

threat-I'll not speak to anyone of this, save by your leave. Still, if I judge Arutha right, he would sooner know as not."

"That is for me to decide, Amos, no one else. Someday perhaps I'll tell him, or I may not."

Amos pushed himself from the rail. "I've much to do before I turn in, Martin, but I'll say one more thing. You've plotted a lonely course. I do not envy you your journey upon it. Good night."

"Good night." After Amos had returned to the quarterdeck, Martin watched the familiar stars in the sky. All the companions of his solitary travels through the hills of Crydee looked down upon him. The constellations shone in the night, the Beasthunter and the Beasthound, the Dragon, the Kraken, and the Five Jewels. He turned his attention to the sea, staring down into the blackness, lost in thoughts he had once imagined buried forever.

"LaND Ho!" shouted the lookout.

"Where away?" answered Amos.

"Dead ahead, Captain."

Arutha, Martin, and Amos left the quarterdeck and quickly made their way to the bow. As they stood waiting for land to heave into sight, Amos said, "Can you feel that trembling each time we breast a trough? It's that keelson, if I know how a ship's made, and I do. We'll need to put in at a shipyard for refitting in Krondor."

Arutha watched as the thin strip of land in the distance grew clearer in the afternoon light. While not bright, the day was relatively fair, only slightly overcast. "We should have time. I'll want to return to Crydee as soon as Erland's convinced of the risk, but even if he agrees at once, it will take some time to gather the men and ships." Martin said, dryly, "And I for one would not care to pass the Straits of Darkness again until the weather is a bit more agreeable."

Amos said, "Man of faint heart. You've already done it the hard way. Going to the Far Coast in the dead of winter is only slightly suicidal."

Arutha waited in silence as the distant landfall began to resolve in detail. In less than an hour they could clearly make out the sights of Krondor's towers rising into the air, and ships at anchor in the harbour.

"Well," said Amos, "if you wish a state welcome, I'd better have your banner broken out and run up the mast."

Arutha held him back, saying, "Wait, Amos. Do you mark that ship by the harbour's mouth?"

As they closed upon the harbour, Amos studied the ship in question. "She's a beastly bitch. Look at the size of her. The Prince's building them a damn sight bigger than when I was last in Krondor. Three-masted. and rigged for thirty or better sail from flying jib to spanker. From the lines of her hull, she's a greyhound, no doubt. I'd not want to run up against her with less than three Quegan galleys. You'd need the rowers, for those oversized crossbows she

mounts fore and aft would quickly make a hash of your rigging.'

those Quegan galleys were so far from home. If sending warships like this to the Bitter Sea, Queg's-" 'Mark the banner at her masthead, Amos,' said Arutha, Entering the harbour. they passed near the ship. On her bow was painted her name, Royal Griffin. Amos said, "A Kingdom warship, no doubt, but I've never seen one under any banner but Krondor's.' Atop the ship's highest mast a black banner emblazoned with a golden eagle snapped in the breeze. 'I thought I knew every banner seen on the Bitter Sea, but that one is new to me.'

'The same banner flies above the docks, Arutha,' said Martin, pointing towards the distant city.

Quietly Arutha said, 'That banner has never been seen on the Bitter Sea before.' His expression turned grim as he said, 'Unless I say otherwise, we are Natalese traders, nothing more . '

"Whose banner is that?' asked Amos.

Gripping the rail. Arutha replied, "it is the banner of the second-oldest house in the Kingdom. It announces that my distant cousin, Guy, the Duke of Bas-Tyra, is in Krondor.'

24

Krondor

The inn was crowded.

Amos led Arutha and Martin through the common room to an empty table near the fireplace. Snatches of conversation reached Arutha's ears as they took their seats. On close inspection the mood in the room was more restrained than it had first appeared.

Arutha's thoughts raced. His plans for securing Erland's help had been crushed within minutes of reaching the harbor. Everywhere in the city were signs that Guy du Bas-Tyra was not simply guesting in Krondor, but was now fully in control. Men of the city watch followed officers wearing the black and gold of Bas-Tyra, and Guy's banner flew over every tower in the city.

When a dowdy serving wench came, Amos ordered three mugs of ale, and the Men waited in silence until they were brought. When the servingwoman was gone, Amos said, "We'll have to pick our way carefully now."

Arutha's expression remained fixed. "How long before we can sail?" "Weeks, at least three. We've got to get the hull repaired, and the keelson replaced correctly.

How long ~will depend on the shipwrights.

Winter's a bad time: the fair-weather traders haul out their ships, so they'll be fit come spring. I'll begin inquiries first thing tomorrow."

"That may take too long. If needs be, buy another."  
Amos raised an eyebrow. "You've funds?"  
'in my chest aboard ship.' With a grim smile, he said  
'The Tsurani aren't the only ones who play politics with  
war. To many of the nobles in Krondor and the East, the  
war is a distant thing, hardly imaginable. It has gone on for  
nearly nine years, and all they ever see is dispatches.  
"And our loyal Kingdom merchants don't donate supplies  
and ships out of love for King Rodric. My gold is a  
hedge against underwriting the cost of bringing Krondorian  
soldiers to Crydee, both in expenses and bribes.'  
"Well then,' said Amos, 'even so it will be a week or two.

You don't usually stroll into a ship's brokerage and pay  
gold for the first ship offered, not if you wish to avoid  
notice. And most of the ships sold are fairly worthless. It  
will take time.'

"And,' put in Martin, 'there's the straits.'

"That's true,' agreed Amos, "though we could take a  
leisurely turn up the coast to Sarth and wait to time our run  
through the straits.'

'No,' said Arutha. 'Sarth is still in the Principality. If  
Guy's in control of Krondor, he'll have agents and soldiers  
there. We won't be safe until we're out of the Bitter Sea.  
We'll attract less attention in Krondor than in Sarth:'  
strangers are not uncommon here.'

Amos looked long at Arutha, then said. "Now, I don't  
claim to know ~you as well as some men i've met, but I don't  
think you're as concerned for your own skin as something  
else '

Arutha glanced about the room. 'We'd better find a less  
public place to talk.'

With a sound between a sigh and a groan, Amos heaved  
himself out of his chair. 'The Sailor's Ease is not where I'd  
' prefer to stay, but for our purposes it will serve.' He made  
his way to the long bar and spoke at length to the  
innkeeper. The heavyset owner of the inn pointed up the  
Stairs and Amos nodded. He signed for his companions to  
accompany him and led them through the press of the  
common room. up the stairs, and down a long hall to the  
last door. Pushing it aside, he motioned for them to enter.  
Inside they found a room with little to recommend itself

by way of comforts. Four straw-stuffed pallets rested on  
the floor. A large box in the corner served as a common  
closet. A crude lamp, a simple wick floating in a bowl of  
oil, sat upon a rude table, it burned with a pungent odour  
when Longbow struck a spark to it.

Amos closed the door as Arutha said, 'I can see what

you meant about choices in rooms.'

'I've slept in far worse,' answered Amos, settling down on one of the pallets. 'If we're to keep our liberty, we'd best establish believable identities. For the time being, we'll call you Arthur. It's close enough to your own to afford a passable explanation should someone call out your real name and cause you to turn or answer. Also, it will be easy to remember.'

Arutha and Martin sat down, and Amos continued. "Arthur-get used to that name-of navigating cities you know less than a thimbleful, which is twice as much as Martin knows. You'll do well to play the ' role of some minor noble's son, from some out-of-the-way place. Martin, you are a hunter from the hills of Natal."

"I can speak the language passing well."

Arutha gave a half-smile. "Get him a grey cloak and he'd make a fair ranger.

I don't speak the language of Natal, or the Keshian tongue, so I'll be the son of a minor eastern noble, visiting for recreation. Few in Krondor could know half the barons of the East."

"Just \_so long as it's not too close to Bas-Tyra. With all those black;,' tabards about, it would be a pretty thing to run into a supposed cousin among Guy's officers."

Arutha's expression turned dark. "You were correct about my concerns, Amos. I'll not leave Krondor until I've discovered exactly what Guy is doing here and what it means for the war."

"Even should I find us a ship tomorrow," said Amos, "which is unlikely, you should have plenty of time to snoop about. Probably find out more than you'll want to know. The city's a lousy place for secrets. The rumormongers will be plying their trade in the market, and every commoner in the city will know enough to give you a fair picture of what's taken place. Just remember to keep your mouth shut and ears open.'Rumormongers'I sell you what you want to know-then turn around and sell news of your asking to the city guard so fast it'd make you spin to' watch." Amos stretched, then said, 'It's still early, but I think we should have a hot meal, then to bed. We've a lot of prowling about to accomplish.'" With that he rose and opened the door, and the three returned to the common room.

Arutha munched upon a nearly cold meat pie. Lowering his head, he forced himself to continue consuming the piman's greasy ware. He refused to consider what was contained within the soggy crust in addition to the beef and pork the seller claimed.

Casting a sidelong glance across the busy square, Arutha studied the gates to Prince Erland's palace . Finishing the pie, he quickly crossed to an ale stand and ordered a large mug to wash away the aftertaste. For the last hour he had moved, seemingly without purpose, from seller's cart to seller's cart, purchasing this and that, posing as a minor noble's son. And in that hour'he had learned a great deal.

Martin and Amos came into sight, nearly an hour before the appointed time. Both wore grim expressions and kept glancing nervously about. Without comment, Amos motioned for Arutha to follow as they walked by. They pushed through the midday throng and passed quickly away from the great-square district. Reaching a less hospitable-looking though no less busy area, they continued until Amos indicated they should enter a particular building. Once through the door, Arutha was met by a hot

steamy atmosphere as an attendant came to greet them. "A bathhouse?" said Arutha.

Without humour, Amos said, 'You need to get rid of some road dirt, Arthur.' To the attendant he said, 'A steam for us all.'

The man led them to a changing room and handed each a rough towel and a canvas bag for belongings. Arutha stood quietly as first Amos, then Martin stripped down, then followed suit. They wrapped the towels about them and carried their clothing and weapons in bags into the steam room. The large room was completely tiled, though the walls

and floors were stained and showed patches of green. The air was close and fetid. A small half-naked boy squatted in the

centre of the room, before the bed of rocks that supplied the steam. He alternately fed wood to the huge brazier below the stones and poured water upon them, generating giant clouds of steam.

When they were seated upon a bench, in the farthest corner of the room, Arutha said, "Why a bathhouse?' Amos whispered, 'A great deal of business is conducted in places such as these, so three men whispering in the corner won't draw undue attention.' He shouted to the boy, 'You, lad, run and fetch some chilled wine.' Amos tossed a silver coin at the boy, who caught it in midair. When he didn't move, Amos tossed him another and the boy scampered off. With a sigh, Amos said, 'The price of chilled wine has doubled since I was last here. He'll be gone for a while, but not too long.'

'What is this?' asked Arutha, not taking pains to hide his ill humour. The towel itched and the room stank. and he doubted if he'd be any cleaner for the time spent here than if he'd stayed in the square.

"Martin and I both have troublesome news.'

"As do I. I already know Guy is Viceroy in Krondor.

What else have you learned?'

Martin said, "i overheard some conversation which makes me believe Guy has imprisoned Erland and his family in the palace.'

Arutha's eyes narrowed, and his voice was low and angry. "Even Guy wouldn't dare harm the Prince of Krondor."

Martin said, "He would should the King give his leave. I know little of this trouble between the King and the Prince, but it is clear Guy is now the power in Krondor and acts with the King's permission, if not his blessing. You told me of Caldric's warning when you were last in Rillanon.

Perhaps the King's sickness has grown worse."

"Madness, if you mean to speak clearly," snapped Arutha.

"To further cloud things in Krondor," said Amos, "it seems we are at war with Great Kesh."

"What!" said Arutha.

"A rumor, nothing more." Amos spoke quietly and quickly. "Before finding Martin, I was nosing around a local joy house, not too far from the garrison barracks. I overheard some soldiers at their ease saying they were to leave at first light for a campaign. When the object of one soldier's momentary ardor asked when she would see him again, he said, 'As long as it takes to march to the vale and back, should luck be with us,' at which point he invoked Ruthia's name, so that the Lady of Luck would not view his discussion of her province unfavorably."

"The vale?" said Arutha. "That can only mean a campaign down into the Vale of Dreams. Kesh must have hit the garrison at Shamata with an expeditionary force of dog-soldiers. Guy's no fool. He'll know the only answer's a quick, unhesitating strike from Krondor, to show Great Kesh's Empress we can still defend our borders. Once the dog soldiers have been driven south of the vale, we'll have another round of useless treaty talks over who has the right to it. That means even should Guy wish to aid Crydee, which I doubt, he could not. There's no time to deal; with Kesh, return, and reach Crydee by spring, or even early summer." Arutha swore. "This is bitter news, Amos."

"There is still more. Earlier today I took the trouble to visit the ship, just to ensure Vasco had everything in hand, and that the men weren't chafing too much at being kept aboard. Our ship is being watched."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. There's a couple of boys who stand around, playing at mending, but they do no real work. They watched closely as I rowed there and back."

"Who do you think they are?"

"I can't begin to guess. They could be Guy's men, or men still loyal to Erland. They could be agents of Great Kesh, smugglers, even Mockers."

"Mockers?" asked Martin.

"The Guild of Thieves," said Arutha. "Little goes on in Krondor without notice by their leader, the Upright Man."

Amos said, "That mysterious personage runs the Mockers with tighter control than a captain has over his crew.

There are places in the city where even the Prince cannot reach, but no place in Krondor is beyond the Upright Man.

If he's taken an interest in us, for whatever reason, we have much to fear.' The conversation was interrupted by the serving boys's

return. He set down a chilled pewter pitcher of wine and three cups. Amos said, 'Fetch yourself to the nearest

incense vender, boy. This place stinks. Buy something sweet to toss upon the fire.'

The boy regarded them a little warily, then shrugged as Amos tossed him another coin. He ran from the room, and Amos said, "He'll be back soon, and I've run out of reasons to send him away. In any event this place will soon be thick with merchants taking an afternoon steam.

'When the boy comes back, sip some wine, try to relax, and don't leave too soon. Now, in all this bleak mess, there is one small glimmer of light . '

'Then I would hear what it is,' said Arutha.

'Guy will soon be gone from the city.'

Arutha's eyes narrowed. "Still, his men will be left in charge. But what you say does have some aspect of comfort. There are few in Krondor likely to mark me by sight, for it's nearly nine years since I was last here, and most of those have likely disappeared with the Prince. Also, there is a plan I've been considering. With Guy out of Krondor, I would have an even better chance of success.'

What plan?" asked Amos.

'When I've had more time to dwell upon it. Where could Brothels, drug houses, and gambling halls are all inns. Either the Mockers control them and note everyone and going, or there are others about looking for information too. If someone overheard you speaking the wrong phrase, the Mockers guards could be down on you in minutes.'" He was quiet for a moment, Then he smiled. "I have the very place! When the town watch hour bell, two hours after sunset, meet me at the east end of the square."

The boy returned and tossed a small bundle of incense upon the fire, cutting off conversation. Arutha settled back and drank the chilled wine, rapidly warming in the heat of the steam room. He closed his eyes, but was not relaxing, as he considered the situation. After a while he began to feel his plan might work if he could reach Dulanic. Running out of patience, he was the first to rise, rinse off, dress, and leave.

ARUTHA WAITED as Martin and Amos approached from different parts of the city, crossing Temple Square. On all sides the temples of the greater and lesser gods rose up. Several were busy with pilgrims and worshipers entering and leaving, while others were nearly deserted.

Reaching the Prince, Amos said, "How fared you this afternoon?"

Arutha spoke softly. "I occupied my time in a tavern, keeping to myself. I did overhear some conversation about Erland, but when I tried to get closer, the speakers moved off. Otherwise I considered the plan I spoke of."

Martin glanced about, then said, "An ill-omened place you picked, Amos. Gathered at this end of the square are all the gods and goddesses of darkness and chaos."



Amos shrugged. "Which means few travelers nearby after night fall. And a clear view of anyone approaching." To Arutha he said, 'Now, what is this plan?'

Quietly and quickly, Arutha said, "I noticed two things this morning, Erland's personal guards still patrol the palace grounds, so there must be limits to Guy's control. Second, several of Erland's courtiers entered and left freely enough, so some large portion of the daily business of governing the Western Realm must remain unchanged."

Amos stroked his chin, thinking. "That would seem logical. Guy brought his army with him, not his administrators. They're still back ; running Bas-Tyra."

"Which means Lord Dulanic and others not entirely sympathetic to Guy might still be able to aid us. If Dulanic will help, I can still succeed with my mission."

"How?" asked Amos.

"As Erland's Knight-Marshal, Dulanic has control of vassal garrisons ~: to Krondor. Upon his signature alone he could call up the garrisons at Durrony's Vale and Malac's Cross. If he ordered them to march to Sarth, they could join the garrison there and take ship for Crydee. It would be a hard march, but we could still bring them to Crydee by ". spring."

"And no hardship to your father, either. I was going to tell you: I have heard Guy has sent soldiers from the Krondorian garrison to your father."

Arutha said, "That seems strange. I can't imagine Guy wishing to aid Father."

Amos shook his head. "Not so strange. To your father it will seem as " if Guy has been sent by the King only to aid Erland, for I suspect the . rumours of Erland's being a prisoner in his own palace are not as yet widespread.

Also. it is a fine pretext to rid the city of officers and men loyal to the Prince. 'Still, it is no small boon to your father. From all

accounts nearly four thousand men have left or are leaving for the north. That might be enough to deal with the Tsurani should they come against the Duke.'

Martin said, 'But should they come against Crydee?'

"For that we must seek aid. We must get inside the

palace and find Dulanic.'

'How?' Amos asked.

'it was my hope you might have a suggestion.'

Amos looked down, then said, 'is there anyone in the palace you know to be trustworthy?'

'Before, I could have named a dozen, but this business makes me doubt everyone. Who stands with the Viceroy and who with the Prince I can't begin to guess.'

'Then we'll have to nose about some more. And we'll have to listen for news of likely ships for transport. Once we've hired a few, we'll slip them out of Krondor one or two at a time, every few days. We'll need at least a score to carry the men of three garrisons. Assuming you get

Dulanic's support, which brings us back to gaining entrance to the palace.' Amos swore softly. 'Are you sure you wouldn't care to chuck this business and become a privateer?' Arutha's expression clearly showed he was unamused. Amos sighed. 'I thought not.'

Arutha said, "You seem to know the underside of the city well, Amos. Use your experience to find us a way into the palace, even if through the sewer. I'll keep my eyes open for any of Erland's men who might wander through the great square. Martin, you'll have to simply keep your ears open.' With a long sigh of resignation, Amos said, "Getting

into the palace is a risky plan, and I don't mind telling you I don't care for the odds.

Amos looked at a nearby temple. "I may even bounce into Ruthias temple and ask the Lady of Luck to smile upon us." Arutha fished a gold coin from his purse and tossed it to Amos. "Say a prayer for me as well. I'll see you back at the tavern later."

The night's silence was ruptured by trumpets calling men to arms. Arutha was the first to the window, thrusting aside the wooden shutters and peering through. With most of the city asleep, there were few lights to mask the glow in the east. Amos reached Arutha's side, Martin a step behind.

Martin said, "Campfires, hundreds of them." The Huntmaster glanced heavenward, marking the stars' positions in the clear sky, and said, "Two hours to dawn."

"Guy's readying his army for the march," said Arutha quietly. Amos leaned far out the window. By craning his neck, he could catch a glimpse of the harbor. In the distance men were calling aboard ships. "Sounds like they're readying ships as well."

Arutha leaned with both hands upon the table by the window. "Guy will send his foot soldiers by ship down the coast, into the Sea of Dreams, to Shamata, while his cavalry rides to the south. His foot will reach the city fresh enough to help bolster the defense, and when his horses arrive, they aren't sick from traveling by ship. And they'll arrive within days of one another."

As if to prove his words, from the east came the sounds of marching men. Then a few minutes later the first company of Bas-Tyra's foot soldiers came into view. Arutha and his companions watched them march past the open gate of the inn's courtyard. Lanterns gave the soldiers a strange, otherworld appearance as they marched in columns down the street. They stepped in cadence, their golden-eagle banners snapping above their heads. Martin said, "They are well-schooled troops."

Arutha said, "Guy is many things, most of them unpleasant, but one thing cannot be argued: he is the finest general in the Kingdom. Even Father is forced to admit that, though he'll say nothing else good about the man. Were I the King, I would send the Armies of the East under his command to fight the Tsurani. Three times Guy has marched

against Kesh, and three times he has thrashed them. If the Keshians do not know he's come west, the very sight of his banner in the field may drive them to the peace table, for they fear and respect him." Arutha's voice became thoughtful in tone. "There is one thing. When Guy first came to be Duke of Bas-Tyra, he suffered some sort of personal dishonor-Father never told what that shame was-and took to wearing only black as a badge of sorts, earning him the name Black Guy. That type of thing takes a strange brand of personal courage. Whatever else can be said of Black ~ Guy du Bas-Tyra, none will call him craven."

While the soldiers continued to pass below, Arutha and his companions watched in silence. Then, with the sun rising in the east, the last soldiers disappeared along the streets to the harbor.

THE MORNING after Guy's army had marched, it was announced the city . was sealed, the gates closed to all travelers and the harbor blockaded. Arutha judged it a normal practice, to prevent Keshian agents from leaving the city by fast sloop or fast horse to carry word of Guy's march. Amos used a visit to the Wind of Dawn to view the harbour blockade and discovered it was a light one, for Guy had ordered most of the fleet to stand off the coast at sea ambush, watching for any Keshian flotillas should Kesh learn the city was stripped of her garrison. The city was now policed by city guards in Guy's livery, as the last Krondorian soldiers departed for the north. rumour had it Guy would also send the garrison at Shamata to the front once the fighting with Kesh had been settled, leaving every garrison in the Principality manned by soldiers loyal to Bas- Tyra.

Arutha spent most of his time in taverns, places of business, and the open markets most likely to be frequented by those from the palace. Amos prowled near the docks or in the city's seedier sections, especially the infamous Poor Quarter, and began making discreet inquiries about the availability of ships. Martin used his guise as a simple woodsman to blunder into any place that looked promising.

Nearly a week went by this way, with little new information being unearthed. Then, late the sixth day after Guy had quit the city Arutha found himself being hailed in the middle of the busy square by Martin.

"Arthur!" shouted the hunter as he ran up to Arutha.

'Best come quickly.' He set off towards the waterfront and the Sailor's Ease.

Back at the inn they found Amos already in the room resting upon his pallet before his nightly sojourn in the Poor Quarter. Once the door was closed, Martin said, 'I think they may know Arutha's in Krondor.'

Amos bolted upright as Arutha said, "What? How . . . ?'  
'I wandered into a tavern near the barracks, just before

the midday meal. With the army gone from the city, there was little business. One man did enter, just as I was readying to leave. A scribe with the city's Quartermaster, he was fit to burst with a rumour and in need of someone to tell it to. So, with the aid of some wine, I obliged him by playing the simple woodsy, and by showing respect for so important a personage. 'Three things this man told me. Lord Dulanic has

disappeared from Krondor, gone the night Guy left. There's some business of his having retired to nameless estates to the north, now that Guy's Viceroy, but the scribe thought that unlikely. The second thing was news of Lord Barry's death.'

Arutha's face showed shock. "The Prince's Lord-Admiral dead?"

"This man told me Barry had died under mysterious circumstances, though there's no official announcement planned. Some eastern lord, Jessup, has been given command of the Krondorian fleet."

"Jessup is Guy's man," said Arutha. "He commanded the Bas-Tyra squadrons of the King's fleet."

"And lastly, the man made a display of knowing some secret concerning a search for someone he only called 'the Viceroy's royal cousin.'"

Amos swore. "I don't know how, but someone's marked you. With Erland and his family virtual captives in the palace, there's hardly a chance another royal cousin's come wandering into Krondor in the last few days, unless you've a few out and about you've not told us of."

Arutha ignored Amos's feeble humor. In the span of time it took for Longbow to tell his tale, all his plans for aiding Crydee were dashed. The city was firmly in control of those either loyal to Guy or indifferent to who ruled in the King's name. There was no one in the city he could turn to for help, and his failure in bringing aid home was a bitter thing. Quietly he said, "Then there's no other course but to return to Crydee as soon as possible."

"That may not be so easy," said Amos. "There's more strange things occurring. I've been in places where a man can usually make contact with those needed for a dishonest task or two, but everywhere I've made inquiries-discreet, have no doubt-I come up against only hard silence.

If I didn't know better, I'd swear the Upright Man's closed up shop and all the Mockers are now serving in Guy's army. I've never seen such a collection of dumb barmen, ignorant whores, uninformed beggars, and tongueless gamblers. You don't need to be a genius to see the word's gone out. No one is to talk to strangers, no matter how promising a transaction's being offered. So we can look for no aid in getting free of the city, and if Guy's agents know you're in Krondor, there'll be no lifting of the blockade or opening of the gates until you've been found, no matter how loudly the merchants scream."

"We're deep in the snare," agreed Martin.

"But if Guy's men only suspect I'm in Krondor, they may tire of the search."

"True," agreed Amos, "and after a while, the Mockers may open up as well. Should they agree to hel~for a significant price, you can be

certain-we'll have powerful help in leaving the city."

Arutha balled his fist and struck the pallet upon which he sat. "Damn Bas-Tyra. I'd gladly murder him this instant. Not only does he imperil the west, he risks a greater schism between the two realms by taking the Principality under his own banner. Should anything happen to Erland and his family, it's almost certainly civil war."

Amos slowly shook his head. "A bollixed mission this, and through no fault of yours, Arutha." He sighed. "Still, we can't be startled into panic. Friend Martin may have misunderstood the scribe's last remark, the man may have been speaking simply to hear himself talk. We'll have to be cautious, but we can't bolt and run. Should you vanish from sight completely, someone might take notice. Best if you stay close to the inn, but act as you have been, for the time being. I'll continue to make attempts at

reaching someone who may have ways to get us clear of the city - smugglers, if not the Mockers.'

Arutha rose from the pallet and said, "I've no appetite, but we've eaten together in the common room every night. I expect we'd best go down for supper soon.'

Amos waved him back to his bed. "Stay a while longer I'm going to run down to the docks and visit the ship. If Martin's scribe was not just breaking wind, they'll certainly search the ships in the harbour. I'd better warn Vasco and the crew to be ready to go over the side if necessary, and find some place to store your chest. We aren't due to be hauled out for refitting for another week, so we must act with care. I've run blockades before. I wouldn't want to risk it in a hulk as leaky as the Wind of Dawn, but if I can't find another ship . . .' At the door he turned back to face Arutha and Martin. 'it's a black storm, boys, but we've weathered worse.'

Arutha and Martin sat quietly as Amos entered the common room. The seaman pulled out a chair and called for ale and a meal. Once he was served, he said, 'All is taken care of. Your chest is safe as long as the ship is left moored.'

'Where did you hide it?'

'it's snugly wrapped in oilcloth and tied securely to the anchor.'

Arutha looked impressed. 'Underwater?'

'You can buy new clothes, and gold and gems don't rust.'

Martin said, 'How are the men?'

"Grumbling over being in port another week and still

aboard ship, but they're good lads.'

The door to the inn opened and six men entered. Five took chairs near the door while one stood surveying the room. Amos hissed, 'See that rat-faced fellow who just sat down? He's one of the boys who've been watching

the docks for the last week. Look's like I've been followed . '

The man who remained standing spotted Amos and approached the table. He was a plain-looking man, of open countenance. His reddishblond hair was flyaway around his head, and he wore a common sailor's clothing. He clutched a wool cap in hand as he smiled at them.

Amos nodded, and the man said, "If you're the master of the Wind of Dawn, I'd have words with you."

Amos raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He indicated the free chair and the man sat. "Name's Radburn. I'm looking for a berth, Captain."

Amos looked about, seeing Radburn's companions were pretending not to notice what was transpiring at the table. "Why my ship?"

"I've tried others. They're all full up. Just thought I'd ask you."

"Who was your last master, and why did you leave his service?"

Radburn laughed, a friendly sound. "Well, I last sailed with a company of barge ferrymen, taking cargo from ship to shore in the harbor.

Been stuck doing that for a year." He fell silent as the serving wench approached. Amos ordered another round of ale, and when one was set

before Radburn, he said, "Thank you, Captain." He took a long pull and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Before I came to be beached, I sailed with Captain John Avery, aboard the Bantamina."

"I know the Little Rooster, and John Avery, though I haven't seen him since I was last in Durbin, five or six years back."

"Well, I got a little drunk, and the captain told me he'd have none who drank aboard his ship. I drink no more than the next man, Captain, but you know Master Avery's reputation, being an abstemious follower of Sung the White."

Amos looked at Martin and Arutha, but said nothing. Radburn said, "These your officers, Captain?"

"No, business partners." When it was clear Amos was going to say nothing more, Radburn let the topic of identities drop. Amos finally said, "We've been in the city little more than a week, and I've been busy with personal matters. What news?"

Radburn shrugged. "The war goes on. Good for the merchants, bad for the rest. Now we've the business with Kesh. Before the troubles was along the Far Coast, but now . . . Krondor might not prove such a healthy spot if the Viceroy doesn't chase the dogs of Kesh back home. Otherwise, there's the usual gossip . . ." He glanced around, as if looking for anyone who might overhear. ". . . and some not so usual."

Amos lifted his mug to his lips saying nothing. "Since the Viceroy's come," said Radburn quietly, "things haven't been the same in Krondor. An honest man isn't safe on the streets anymore, what with Durbin slavers running about and the press gangs almost as bad. That's why I need a ship, Captain."

"Bress gangs!" Amos exploded. "There hasn't been a press gang in a kingdom city in thirty years."

"Once was, but now things have changed again. You get a little drunk and don't find a safe berth for the night, the press gang comes along and slaps you into the dungeon. It just isn't right, no sir. Just because a Man's between ships doesn't give anyone the right to ship him out with Lord Jessup's fleet for seven years. Seven years of chasing pirates and

fighting Quegan war galleys!"

Amos's eyes narrowed. "How is it that Guy rules in Krondor? We've heard stories, but they seem confused."

" . Radburn nodded. "Right you are, Captain. For it is confusing. A Month ago, Lord Guy rides in with his army behind, flags a'waving, drums beating, and the rest. The Prince, so they say, welcomes him and treats him real friendly, even though du Bas-Tyra is carrying the King's parchment naming him Viceroy. The Prince even helps him, they say, until the business of the press gangs and such comes to his ears." Lowering his voice more, he said, "I heard that when he complained, Guy locks him up in his rooms. Nice rooms, I expect, but same as a cell if you can't leave. So I hear."

Arutha was so outraged by the story, he was on the verge of speaking. Amos gripped his arm quickly, warning silence, then said, "Well, Radburn, I can always use a good man who's sailed with John Avery. I'll tell you what. I've one more trip to the ship to make tonight, and there're some personal belongings in my room I'll want aboard. Come along and carry them.'

Amos rose and, giving the man no time to object, gripped him by the arm and propelled him towards the stairs. Arutha shot a glance at the group who entered with Radburn. They seemed unaware for the moment of what was transpiring across the crowded common room as Amos took Radburn up the stairs, Arutha and Martin following behind.

Amos hustled Radburn down the hall and, once through the door to their room, spun and delivered a staggering blow to Radburn's stomach, doubling him over. A brutal knee to the face, and Radburn lay stunned upon the floor.

"What is this all about?' said Arutha.

"That man's a liar. John Avery's a marked man in Kesh.

He betrayed the Durbin Captains to a Quegan raiding fleet twenty years ago. Yet Radburn didn't bat an eye when I said I saw Avery in Durbin six years ago. And he's too free in showing disrespect to the Viceroy. His story stinks like a week-dead fish. We go out the door with him, and inside of two blocks a dozen men or more will be upon US.'

'What shall we do?' said Arutha.

"We leave. His friends will be up those stairs in a minute." He pointed to the window. Martin stood by the door as Arutha ripped aside a dirty canvas shade and pushed open the wooden shutters. Amos said, "Now you see why I chose this room." Less than a yard below the window's ledge was the roof of the stable.

Arutha stepped out, Amos and Martin following. They hurried carefully down the steeply sloping roof until they reached the edge. Arutha leaped down, landing quietly, followed a moment later by Martin. Amos landed more heavily, but suffered only a minor bruise to his dignity.

They heard a cough and an oath, and looked up to see a bloodied face at the window. Radburn shouted, "They're in the courtyard!" as the three fugitives started for the gate.

Amos swore. "I should have cut his throat."

They ran to the gate, and as they entered the street, Amos grabbed at Arutha. A group of men were running down the street toward them. Arutha and his companions fled the opposite way, ducking into a dark alley.

Hurrying along between the blank walls of two buildings, they cut across a busy street, overturning several pushcarts, and ducked into another alley, the cart owners' curses following. They continued to run, the sounds of pursuit never far behind, following a twisting maze of back alleys and side streets through darkened Krondor.

Turning a corner, they found themselves intersecting a long narrow street, little more than an alley, flanked on both sides by tall buildings. Amos rounded the corner first and motioned for Arutha and Martin to halt. In low tones, he said, "Martin, hurry down to the corner and take a look around. Arutha, go the other way." He pointed toward a spot where dim light could be seen. "I'll stand watch here. If we become separated, make for the ship. It'll be a desperate chance, breaking the blockade, but should you win free, have Vasco make for Durbin. Your gold will buy you enough protection there to get the ship refitted and you back to Crydee. Now go."

Arutha and Martin ran down the street in opposite directions, and Amos stood watch behind. Abruptly shouts came down the narrow street, and Arutha looked back. At the other end of the street he could see the dim figure of Martin struggling with several men. He started back, but Amos shouted, "Go on. I'll help him. Get away!"

Arutha hesitated, then resumed his run toward the distant light. He was panting when he reached the corner and nearly skidded to a halt as he entered a well-traveled, brightly lit avenue. From carts decorated with lanterns, hawkers sold their wares to passing citizens out for a stroll after supper. The weather was mild—there looked to be little chance of snow this winter—and large numbers of people were about. From the condition of the buildings and the fashions of those in the area, Arutha knew he was in a more prosperous section of the city.

Arutha stepped into the street and walked at a forced leisurely pace. He turned and made a display of examining a garment seller's wares as several men appeared from the street he had just fled. He tugged a garish red cloak from among the goods and swirled it about his shoulder, pulling the hood over his head. "Here now, what do you think you're doing?" asked a dried-faced old man in a reedy whisper.

Affecting a nasal voice, Arutha said, "My good man, you don't expect me to purchase a garment without seeing if it fits?"

Suddenly confronted by a buyer, the man became unctuously friendly. "Oh no, certainly, sir." Looking at Arutha in the ill-tailored cloak, he said, "It's a perfect fit, sir, and the colour suits you well, if I may say."



Arutha chanced a glance at his pursuers. The man Called Radburn stood at the corner, blood dried upon his face and his nose swollen, but still able to direct his men's search. Arutha adjusted the cloak, a great, cumbersome thing that hung nearly to the ground. In a display of fussiness, he said, 'You think so? I wouldn't care to appear at court looking like a vagabond.'

'Oh, court is it, sir? Well, it's just the thing, mark me. It adds a certain elegance to your appearance.'

'How much is it?' Arutha saw Radburn's men walking through the busy crowd, some looking into each tavern and storefront as they passed, others hurrying on to other destinations. More followed from the smaller street, and Radburn spoke quickly to them. He set some to watching those in the street, then turned and led the rest back the way they had come.

'It's the finest cloth made in Ran, sir,' said the seller. 'It was brought at great expense from the shore of the Kingdom Sea. I couldn't let it go for less than twenty golden sovereigns.'

Arutha blanched, and for a moment was so struck by the outrageous price he nearly forgot himself. "Twenty?" He lowered his voice as a passing member of Radburn's

company threw him a quick glance. "My dear man," he said, returning to character, 'I seek to purchase a cloak, not establish an annuity for your grandchildren.' Radburn's man turned away, and disappeared into the press of the crowd. 'It is rather a plain wrap, after all. I should think two sovereigns more than sufficient.'

They haggled for another ten minutes, and Arutha finally departed with the cloak for the price of eight sovereigns and two silver royals. It

was double the price he should have paid, but the searchers had ignored a man haggling with a street seller, and escaping detection was worth the price a hundred times over.

Arutha kept alert for signs he was being watched as he made his way along the street. Unfortunately he knew little of Krondor and had no idea where he was after the flight. He kept to the busier part of the street, staying close to larger groups, seeking to blend in.

Arutha saw a man standing at the corner, seemingly idling the night away, but clearly watching those who passed. Arutha looked around and saw a tavern on the other side of the street, marked by a brightly painted sign of a white dove. He quickly crossed the street, keeping his face turned away from the man at the corner, and approached the doorway of the tavern. As he reached for the door, a hand gripped his: cloak, and Arutha spun, his sword halfway out of its scabbard. A boy of about thirteen stood there, wearing a simple, oft-patched tunic and men's trousers cut off at the knees. He had dark hair and eyes, and his smudged face was set in a grin. "Not there, sir," he said with a merry; note in his voice. '

Arutha slipped his sword back into the scabbard and fell into character. "Begone, boy. I've no time for beggars or panderers, even those of limited stature."

The boy's grin broadened. "If you insist, but there are two of them in there."

Arutha dropped his nasal accent. "Who?"

"The men who chased you from the side street."

Arutha glanced about. The boy appeared alone. He looked into the boy's eyes and said, "What are you talking about?"

"I saw how you acted. Quick on your feet, sir. But they've blanketed the area, and you'll not be slipping by them yourself."

Arutha leaned forward. "Who are you, boy?"

With a toss of his ragged hair he said, "Name's Jimmy. I work hereabouts. I can get you out. For a fee, of course."

"And what makes you think I wish to get out?"

"Don't play the fool with me, like you did with the merchant, sir. You need to get clear of somebody who's likely to pay me to show him where you are. I've run afoul of Radburn and his men before, so you have more of my sympathy than he's likely to get. As long as you can bid more for your freedom than he will for your capture."

"You know Radburn?"

Jimmy grinned. "Not so as I'd care to admit, but yes, we've had dealings before."

Arutha was struck by the boy's cool manner, not what he would have expected from the boys he knew back home. Here stood an old hand at negotiating the treacherous byways of the city. "How much?"

"Radburn will pay me twenty-five gold to find you, fifty if he especially wants your skin."

Arutha took out his coin pouch and handed it to the boy. "Over a hundred sovereigns in there, boy. Get me out of here and to the docks, and I'll double it."

The boy's eyes flickered wide a moment, but he never lost his grin.

"You must have offended someone with a lot of influence. Come along."

He darted away so quickly, Arutha almost lost him in the heavy crowd. The boy moved with the ease of experience through the press, and Arutha had to struggle to keep from jostling people in the street.

Jimmy led him into an alley, several blocks away. When they were a short way down the alley, Jimmy stopped. "Better toss that cloak. Red's not my favorite color for looking inconspicuous." When Arutha had pitched the cloak into an empty barrel, Jimmy said, "You'll be pointed at the docks in a moment. If someone tumbles onto us, you're on your own. But for that other hundred gold, I'll try to see you all the way."

They worked their way to the end of the alley, apparently seldom used from the heavy accumulation of trash and discarded objects, packing crates, broken furniture, and nameless goods against the walls around them.

Jimmy pulled aside a crate, revealing a hole. 'This should put us outside Radburn's net, at least I hope so,' said

Jimmy.

Arutha found he had to crouch to follow the boy through the small passage. From the rank odour in the tunnel, it was clear something had crawled in here to die fairly recently. As if reading his mind, Jimmy said, 'We toss a dead cat in here every few days. Keeps others from sticking their noses too far in.'

'We?' said Arutha. Jimmy ignored the question and kept moving. Soon they exited into another alley overburdened with trash. At the mouth of the alley, Jimmy motioned for Arutha to stop and wait. He hurried along the dark street, then returned at a run. 'Radburn's men. They must have known you'd head for the harbour.'

'Can we slip past them!'

'No chance. They're as thick as lice on a beggar.' The boy took off in the opposite direction down the street they had entered from the alley. Arutha followed as Jimmy turned up another small byway. Arutha hoped he hadn't bargained wrongly in trusting the street boy. After a few minutes of travelling, Jimmy stopped. "I know a place you can hole up awhile, until I can find some others to help get you to your ship. But it'll cost you more than a hundred."

"Get me to my ship before dawn, and I'll give you whatever you ask."

Jimmy grinned. "I can ask a lot." He regarded Arutha for a moment longer, then with a curt nod of his head led off. Arutha followed, and they wound their way deeper into the city. The sounds of people in the streets fell off, and Arutha judged they were moving into an area less well traveled at night. The buildings around them showed they were heading into another poor area of the city, though not close to the docks as far as Arutha could tell.

Several sharp turns through dark, narrow alleys, and Arutha was completely lost. Abruptly Jimmy turned and said, "We're there." He pulled open a door in an otherwise blank wall and stepped through. Arutha climbed a long flight of stairs after him.

Jimmy led him down a long hall at the top of the stairs, to a door.

The boy opened it and indicated Arutha should enter. Arutha took a single step, then halted as he discovered three sword points leveled at his stomach.

25

Escape

%forward into the light of the small lamp on the table, the light revealed his face was covered with pockmarks and he possessed a large hooked nose. His eyes never strayed from Arutha as the three swordsmen stepped back, allowing the Prince entrance. Arutha hesitated as he saw the bound and unconscious forms of Amos and Martin slumped against the wall. Amos groaned and stirred, but Martin remained still. Arutha

measured the distance between himself and the three swordsmen, his hand hovering near the hilt of his rapier. Any notion of leaping back and drawing his sword vanished when he felt a dagger point pressed against the small of his back. A hand snaked around from behind and felt round the Prince, examining the rapier as he carefully hid his dagger in the folds of his loose tunic. He grinned broadly. "I've seen a few of these about. It's light enough I could use it." Dryly Arutha said, "Under the circumstances, it might not be inappropriate to make it my legacy to you. Use it in good health." The pock-faced man said, "You keep your wits about you." as Arutha was ushered into the room by a swordsman.

Another put away his weapon and tied Arutha's arms behind him. He was then roughly thrust into a chair, opposite the man who had spoken, who continued, "My name is Aaron Cook, and you've already met Jimmy the Hand." He indicated the boy. "These others prefer to remain anonymous at present."

Arutha looked at the boy. "Jimmy the Hand?"

The boy executed a fair imitation of a courtly bow, and Cook said, "The finest pickpocket in Krondor and well on his way to becoming the finest thief as well, should you be inclined to believe his self-appraisal. "Now, to matters of business. Who are you?"

Arutha related the story of being Amos's business partner, calling himself Arthur, and Cook studied him stoically. With a sigh, he nodded, and one of the silent men stepped forward and struck Arutha across the mouth. Arutha's head snapped back from the force of the blow, and his eyes watered. "Friend Arthur," said Aaron Cook, shaking his head, "we can go about this interview two ways. I'd advise you not to make the choice of the difficult way. It will prove most unpleasant, and we shall know what we want in the end in any event. So please consider your answer carefully." He stood and came around the table. "Who are you?"

Arutha began to repeat his story, and the man who struck him stepped forward again, ending his answer with another ringing blow. The man called Cook leaned down so his face was level with Arutha's. Arutha blinked to clear the tears from his eyes, and Cook said, "Friend, tell us what we ask. Now, so as not to waste time"-he pointed at Amos "that he is the captain of your ship we concede, but you his business -partner . . . I think not. That other fellow played the part of a hunter from the mountains in several taverns about town, and I think it no mummery; he has the look of one who knows mountains better than city streets, a look hard to forge." He studied Arutha. "But you . . . you are a soldier at least, and your rich boots and fine sword mark you gentleman. But I think there is more." Looking into Arutha's eyes, he said, "Now, why is Jocko Radburn so intent upon finding you?" Arutha looked Aaron Cook squarely in the eyes. "I don't know."

The man who had struck Arutha began to step forward again, but Cook held up his hand. "That may be true. You've been something of a fool, the way you've been popping up here and there, hanging around the gates of the palace, playing the innocent. You are either poor spies, or poor fools, but there is no doubt you've aroused the interest of the Viceroy's men, and therefore ours."

"Who are you?"

Cook ignored the question. "Jocko Radburn's the senior officer in the Viceroy's secret police. Despite that open, honest face on him, Radburn's one of the most steel-nerved, unmovable bastards the gods ever graced this world with. He'd happily cut his grandmother's heart out if he thought the old girl was making free with state secrets. The fact he put in a personal appearance shows he, at the very least, judges you potentially important.

"We first learned three men were nosing about town a day or two after you arrived, and when our people heard some of Radburn's men were keeping an eye upon you, we decided to do likewise. When they began offering small bribes for information about you three, we became especially interested. We were content to simply keep watching you, waiting until you showed your hand.

"But when Jocko and his men showed at the Sailor's Ease, we were forced to act. We snatched those two from under Jocko's nose, but Jocko and his bully boys came down the alley between you and us, so we hurried them

away. Jimmy's finding you was a bit of luck, for he didn't know we were ready to bring you in.' He nodded approval to the boy. "You did right bringing him here.'

Jimmy laughed. "I was on the rooftops, watching the whole thing. I knew you wanted him in as soon as you grabbed the other two.'

One of the men swore. 'You'd better not have been trying for a boost without writ from the Nightmaster, boy.'

Cook raised his hand, and the man fell silent. it will not hurt for you to know that some here are Mockers, others are not, but we are all united in an undertaking of great importance. Mark me well, Arthur. Your only hope of leaving here alive rests upon our being satisfied you do not endanger that undertaking I spoke of. It may be Radburn's interest in you is only coincidental to his interest in other matters. Or there may be a weaving of threads here, some pattern as yet unseen. In any event, we shall have the truth, and when we are satisfied with what you have told us, we shall set you free - perhaps even aid you and your companions - or we shall kill you. Now start at the beginning. Why did you come to Krondor?'

Arutha considered. There was little but pain to be gained by lying, yet he was not willing to tell the entire truth. That these men were not working with Guy's men wasn't proved. This could be a ploy, with Radburn in the next room listening to every word. He decided what part of the truth to tell. "I'm an agent for Crydee. I came to speak to Prince Erland and Lord Dulanic in person, to ask for aid against a coming Tsurani offensive. When we learned Guy du Bas-Tyra was in possession of the city, we decided to gauge the temper of things before committing ourselves to a course of action.'

Cook listened closely, then said, "Why should an emissary of Crydee slip into the city? Why not come in with banners flying and receive a state welcome?"

"Because Black Guy'd just as soon toss him into a cell as not, you stupid bastard."

Cook's head snapped around: Amos was sitting up against the wall, groggily shaking his head. "I think you busted my skull, Cook."

Aaron Cook looked hard at Amos. "You know me?"

"Aye, you wooden-headed sea rat, I know you. I know you well enough to know we're not speaking another word until you go fetch Trevor Hull."

Aaron Cook rose from the table, an uncertain expression on his face. He motioned to one of the men by the door, who also looked discomforted by Amos's words. The man nodded to Cook and left the room.

Minutes later he returned, followed by another man, tall, with a shock of grey hair, but still powerful looking. A ragged scar ran from his forehead through his right eye, which was milky white, and down his cheek. He took a long look at Amos, then laughed aloud and pointed at the captives. "Untie them."

Amos was lifted by two men, then untied. As his ropes were loosened, he said, "I thought they'd hung you years ago, Trevor."

The man clapped Amos on the back. "And I you, Amos."

Cook looked questioningly at the new arrival, while Arutha was untied and Martin revived with a cup of water thrown in his face. The man called Trevor Hull looked at Cook and said, "Have your wits fled, man? He's grown a beard and cut his famous flowing locks-lost some on top and put on a few pounds as well-but he's still Amos Trask."

Cook studied Amos a moment longer, then his eyes widened. "Captain Trenchard?"

Amos nodded, and Arutha looked on in astonishment. Even in far Crydee they had heard of Trenchard the Pirate, the Dagger of the Sea. He'd had a short career, but a famous one. It was reputed even Quegan war galleys had turned and fled at sight of Trenchard's fleet, and there wasn't a town along the coasts of the Bitter Sea that did not fear his marauders.

Aaron Cook extended his hand. "Sorry, Captain. It's been so many years since we last met. We couldn't be certain you weren't part of some plot of Radburn's to locate us."

"Who are you?" asked Arutha.

"All in good time," answered Hull. "Come."

One of the men helped the still-groggy Martin to his feet, and Cook and Hull led them to a more comfortable room, with chairs enough for all. When all were sitting, Amos said, "This old rogue is Trevor Hull, Captain White-eye, master of the Red Raven."

Hull shook his head sadly. "No longer, Amos. Burned off of Elarial she was, three years ago, by imperial Keshian cutters. My mate Cook here and a few of my boys got to shore with me, but most of the crew went down with the Red Raven. We made our way back to Durbin, but things are changing, what with the wars and all. Came to Krondor a year ago and have been working here since."

"Working? You, Trevor?"

The man smiled, his scar wrinkling, as he said, "Smuggling, in fact. That's what brought us together with the Mockers. Not much can happen in Krondor along those lines without the Upright Man's permission. "When the Viceroy first came to Krondor, we started running up against Jocko Radburn and his secret police. He's been a thorn in our side from the first. This business of guards sneaking about dressed as common folk, there's just no honor in it."

Amos muttered, "I knew I should have cut his throat when I had the chance. Next time I won't be so damned civilized."

"Slowing down a bit, Amos? Well, a week ago we got word from the upright Man he had a precious cargo to leave the city. We've had to bide our time until the right ship was ready. Radburn's very anxious to find that cargo before it leaves Krondor. So, you see, it's a most delicate situation, for we can't ship it until the blockade's lifted, or we find a blockade captain we can bribe. When we first caught wind you three were asking questions, we thought it might be some grand plot of Jocko's to find that cargo. Now we've cleared the air, I'd like to hear the answer to Cook's question explained. Why should an emissary from Crydee fear discovery by the Viceroy's men?"

'Listening in, were you?' Amos turned to Arutha, who nodded. "This is no simple emissary, Trevor. Our young friend is Prince Arutha, son of Duke Borric."

Aaron Cook's eyes went wide and the man who had struck Arutha paled. Trevor Hull nodded understanding. 'The Viceroy'd pay handsomely to get his hands upon the son of his old enemy, especially when it came time to press his claim in the Congress of Lords.'

'What claim?' said Arutha.

Hull leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. 'You'd not know, of course. We only heard the news a few days ago ourselves, and it's not common knowledge. Still I'm not free to speak plainly without permission.'

He rose and left the room. Arutha and Amos exchanged questioning glances, then Arutha looked towards Martin. 'Are you all right?'

Martin carefully touched his head. "I'll recover, though they must have hit me with a tree."

One of the men grinned in a friendly, almost apologetic way. Patting a wooden billy in his belt sash, he said, "He's a hard one to bring down, that's for certain."

Hull returned to the room, followed by another. The men in the room rose, and Arutha, Amos, and Martin slowly followed suit. Behind Hull came a young girl no more than sixteen years of age. Arutha was instantly struck by the promise of beauty in her features: large sea-green eyes, straight and delicate nose, and slightly full mouth. A faint hint of freckles dusted her otherwise fair skin. She was tall and slender and walked with poise. She came across the room to Arutha, rose up on tiptoes, and kissed him lightly upon the cheek. Arutha looked surprised at this gesture and watched as she stepped back with a smile upon her lips. She wore a simple dress of dark blue, and her red-brown hair hung

loosely to her shoulders. After a second she said, "Of course, how silly I am. You'd not know me. I saw you when you were last in Krondor, but we never met. I'm your cousin Anita, Erland's daughter."

Arutha stood thunderstruck. Besides the girl's disquieting effect upon his composure, with her winning smile and clear gaze, he was doubly surprised to find her in this company of brigands. He sat down slowly, and she took a chair. So used to the informality of his father's court, he was somewhat surprised when she gave the others permission to sit. "How . . . ?" Arutha began.

Amos interrupted. "The Upright Man's precious cargo?"

Hull nodded, and the Princess spoke. Her pretty face clouded with emotion. "When the Duke of Bas-Tyra came with orders from the King, Father greeted him warmly and offered no resistance. At first Father did all he could to aid him in taking command of the army, but when he heard of the things Guy was doing with his secret police and press gangs, Father protested. Then when Lord Barry died and Guy put Lord Jessup in command of the fleet over Father's objections, and Lord Dulanic disappeared so mysteriously, Father sent a letter to the King, demanding Guy's recall. Guy intercepted the message and ordered us kept under guard in a wing of the palace. Then Guy came to my room one night. '

She shuddered. Arutha nearly spat when he said, "You don't have to speak of such things." The sudden rage startled the girl.

"No," she said, "it was nothing like that. He was very proper, nearly formal. He simply informed me we were to be wed, and that King Rodric was to name him heir to the throne of Krondor. If anything, he seemed irritated by the bother of having to take such a course."

Arutha slammed his fist against the wall behind. "That tears it! Guy means to have Erland's crown and Rodric's after. He means to be King."

Anita looked at Arutha shyly. "So it seems. Father's not well and couldn't resist, though he refused to sign the proclamation of betrothal. Guy had him taken to the dungeon until he would sign." Her eyes teared as she said, "Father cannot live long in such cold and damp quarters. I fear he will die before agreeing to Guy's wishes." She continued to speak, her face a mask of control, though tears ran down her cheeks as she talked of her mother and father's imprisonment. "Then one of my ladies told me a maid knew some people in the city who might be willing to help."

Trevor Hull said, "With your permission, Highness. One of the girls in the palace is sister to a Mocker. With everything up in the wind, the upright Man decided it might be to his advantage to take a hand. He arranged to smuggle the Princess out of the palace the night of Guy's departure, and she's been here since."

Amos said, "Then the rumor we overheard before we fled the Sailor's ease about there being a hunt on for a 'royal cousin' was about Anita, not Arutha."

Hull pointed at the Prince. "It may be Radburn and his boys still have no idea who you are. Most likely, they jumped on you in the hope you'd turn out to be party to the Princess's escape. We're almost certain the



Viceroy has no idea she's gone from the palace, for she fled after he rode out. I expect Radburn is desperate to get her back before his master returns from the war with Kesh.'

Arutha studied the Princess, feeling a strong desire to do something on her behalf, a desire beyond the consideration of foiling Guy. He shunted aside the strange tug of emotions. He asked Trevor Hull, 'Why does the Upright Man wish to contend with Guy? Why isn't he turning her in for a reward?'

Trevor Hull looked to Jimmy the Hand, who answered with a grin. 'My master, a most perceptive man, saw at once his own interests were best served by aiding the Princess. Since Erland has been Prince of Krondor, the business of the city runs smoothly, an environment conducive to the success of my master's many undertakings.

Stability profits us all, you see. With Guy here, we've his secret police about, upsetting the normal commerce of our guild. And whatever else, we are most loyal subjects of His Highness the Prince of Krondor. If he does not wish his daughter to marry the Viceroy, we do not wish it as well.' With a laugh, Jimmy added, 'Besides, the Princess has agreed to pay twenty-five thousand gold sovereigns to our master should the guild get her free of

Krondor, to be delivered when her father returns to power, or some other fate places her upon the throne."

Arutha took Anita's hand and said, "Well, cousin, there is nothing else to be done. We must take you to Crydee at the first chance."

Anita smiled, and Arutha found himself smiling back. Trevor Hull said, "As I said before, we were waiting for the right opportunity to smuggle her from the city." He turned to Amos. "You're the man for this, Amos. There's no better blockade runner on the Bitter Sea-excepting myself, of course, but I've other matters to take care of here."

Trask said, "We can't leave for a few weeks yet. Even if the blockade was lifted, my ship's in desperate need of refitting. And if we left now, we'd have to sail about until the weather in the straits breaks. With Jessup's fleet at sea ambush, that would be risky. I'd rather hide here awhile, then a quick run west, through the straits, and up the Far Coast with no delay."

Hull slapped him on the shoulder. "Good, that will give us time. I've heard of your ship; the boys tell me it's little better than a barge. We'll find you another. I'll send word to your men when the time is right. Radburn'll most likely leave your crew alone, hoping you'll turn up. We'll slip them aboard the new ship a few at a time at night and replace them with my own boys, so Radburn's men won't notice anything unusual aboard."

He turned to Arutha. "You'll be safe enough here, Highness. This building is one of many owned by the Mockers, and none will get close without our having ample warning. When the time is right, we'll get you all free of the city. Now we'll take you to your room, so you may rest."

Arutha, Martin, and Amos were shown to a room down the hall from

the one where they had met Anita, while the Princess returned to her own quarters. The room they entered was a simple affair, but clean. All three men were tired. Martin fell heavily on one pallet and was quickly asleep. Amos lowered himself slowly, and Arutha watched him for a moment. With a slight smile he said, "When you first came to Crydee, I thought you a pirate."

Struggling to remove a boot, Amos said, "In truth, I tried to leave that behind me, Highness." He laughed. "Perhaps it was the gods working their revenge upon me, but you know, for fifteen years, man and boy, I was a corsair and a captain, then when I try my hand at honest trading for the first time, my ship is captured and burned, my crew slaughtered, and I find myself beached as far from the heart of the Kingdom as you can get and still be in it."

Arutha lay down upon his pallet. "You've been a good counselor, Amos Trask, and a brave companion. Your help over the years has earned you a good deal of forgiveness for past wrongdoings, but"-he shook his head-"Trenchard the Pirate! Gods, man, there's so much to forgive."

Amos yawned and stretched. "When we return to Crydee, you can hang me, Arutha, but for now please have the good grace to keep silent and put out the light. I am getting too old for this foolishness. I need some sleep."

Arutha reached over and covered the wick of the lamp with a snuff. He lay back in the darkness, images and thoughts crowding his mind. He thought of his father and what he would do were he here, then wondered how his brother and sister were. Thoughts of Carline caused him to think of Roland, and to speculate how the fortifications of Jonril were progressing. He forced aside the buzzing thoughts and let his mind drift. Then before sleep took him, he remembered Anita, as she rose up on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, and felt again a not entirely comfortable churning within. A faint smile crossed his lips as he fell asleep.

Anita CLAPPED APPRECIATIVELY as Arutha turned aside the point of Jimmy's sword. The boy thief blushed at his awkwardness, but Arutha said, 'That was better.'

He and Jimmy were practising basic swordwork, Jimmy with a rapier purchased with some of the gold Arutha had given him. For a month they had passed the time this way and Anita had taken to watching. Whenever the Princess was around, the usually brash Jimmy the Hand became subdued, and he blushed furiously whenever she spoke to him. Arutha was now certain the boy thief was afflicted by the worst sort of infatuation for the Princess, only three years older than himself. Arutha appreciated Jimmy's distress, for he also found the girl's presence a distraction. Still in the first years of womanhood, she nevertheless carried herself with courtbred grace, had wit and education and showed the promise of mature beauty. Arutha found it easier to turn his thoughts to other topics than the Princess. The basement where they worked on their swordplay was damp and unventilated, so it soon became close and humid. Arutha said,

"That's enough for today, Jimmy. You're still impatient to close, and that could be fatal. You've plenty of speed, and it's good you learn young. You lack arm strength to bash about as many older men do, with the Raipier, that can also prove fatal. Remember, the edge is for cutting-"

"And the point is for killing," finished Jimmy, with a self-conscious grin. 'you'd have to be cautious against a man with a broadsword. He could break your blade if you tried to block instead of parry, but what do you do if one of those alien warriors comes at you with that greatsword you described?"

Arutha laughed. "You find out who can run faster." Anita's laughter joined with Arutha's and Jimmy's. Arutha said, "Seriously, you must stay to the off-hand side. With the big swords, your opponent gets one swing, then you've got an opening-"

The door opened, and Amos walked in with Martin and Trevor Hull. Amos said, "The worse damn luck-begging the Princess's pardon. Arutha, the worst has occurred."

Arutha wiped the perspiration off his brow with a towel and said, "Don't stand there waiting for me to guess. What?"

"News came this morning," said Hull. "Guy is returning to Krondor." "Why?" asked Anita.

Amos said, "It seems our Lord of Bas-Tyra rode into Shamata and ran his banner up above the walls. The Keshian commander had the good grace to mount one more attack, for the sake of form, then nearly gave himself a ruptured gut racing back home. He left a handful of minor nobles haggling with Guy's lieutenants over the conditions of armistice until a formal treaty can be drawn up between the King and the Keshian Empress. There's only one reason Guy can be hurrying back here." Quietly Anita said, "He knows I've escaped."

Trevor Hull said, 'yes, Highness. This Black Guy's a wily one. He must have a spy in Radburn's company. It appears he doesn't even trust his own secret police overmuch. Luckily we still have people inside the palace loyal to your father, or we would never have learned of this turn."

Arutha sat down near the Princess. "Well, then we must soon be gone. It's either sail for home or toward Ylith to reach Father."

Amos said, "Looking at the choices, it seems there is little to recommend one course over the other. Both have dangers and advantages."

Martin looked at the girl, then said, "Though I don't think the Duke's war camp any place for a young woman."

Amos sat down by Arutha. "Your presence in Crydee is not vital, at least not for now. Fannon and Gardan are able men, and should the need arise, I think your sister would prove no mean commander. They should be able to keep things under control as well as you."

Martin said, "But you must ask yourself this: what will your father do "when he learns Guy does not simply rule in Krondor as Erland's aidc but holds the city completely in his power, that he's sending no aid to the Far Coast, and that he means to have the throne?"

Arutha nodded vigorously. "You are right, Martin. You know that full well. It will mean civil war." There was sorrow on his face. "He'll withdraw half the Armies of the West and march down the coast to Krondor and not stop until Guy's head is on a pole before the city's gates. Then

the course will be set. He'll have to turn east and march against Rodric. He'd never wish the crown for himself, but once begun, he cannot stop short of total victory or defeat. But we'd lose the West to the Tsurani in time. Brucal couldn't hold them long with only half an army."

Jimmy said, 'This civil war sounds a nasty sort of business.'

Arutha sat forward. Wiping his forehead, he looked up from under damp locks. "We've not had one in two hundred fifty years, since the first Borric slew his half brother, Jon the Pretender. Compared to what . . . this would be, with all the East marshaled against the West, that was merely a skirmish."

Amos looked at Arutha with concern upon his face. "History's not my strong suit, but it seems to me you'd do best by your father keeping him in ignorance of this turn of events until the Tsurani spring offensive is finished."

Arutha exhaled a long, low breath. "There's nothing else for it. We know no aid will be forthcoming for Crydee. I can best decide what to do when I return. Perhaps in council with Fannon and the others we can work out some defense for when the Tsurani come." His tone was one of near-resignation. "Father will learn of Guy's plotting in due time. this sort of news is too hard to keep. The best we can hope for is he'll not hear of it until after the Tsurani offensive. perhaps by then the situation will have changed." It was obvious from his tone he didn't think that likely.

Martin said, "It may be the Tsurani will choose to march against Elvandar. or carry the battle to your father. Who can say?"

Arutha leaned back and became aware of Anita's hand resting gently upon his arm. 'What a choice we have,' he said quietly. 'To face the possible loss of Crydee and the Far Coast to the Tsurani or to plunge the Kingdom into civil war. Truly the gods must hate the Kingdom.'

Amos stood. 'Trevor tells me he has a ship. We can sail in a few days. With luck, the straits will be clearing when we arrive.'

Lost in the gloom of his own personal defeat, Arutha barely heard him. He had come to Krondor in such confidence. He would win Erland's support for his cause, and Crydee would be rescued from the Tsurani. Now he faced an even more desperate situation than had he stayed home. Those around left him alone, save for Anita, who spent silent minutes just sitting at his side.

DARK FIGURES moved quietly toward the waterfront. Trevor Hull led a dozen men with Arutha and his companions down the silent street. They hugged the walls of the buildings, and every few yards Arutha would cast a backward glance to see how Anita fared. She returned his concern with brave smiles, faintly perceived in the predawn darkness. Arutha knew that over a hundred men moved down adjacent streets, sweeping the area of the city watch and Radburn's agents. The Mockers had turned out in force so Arutha and the others could safely quit the city. Hull had carried word the night before that for a considerable cost

the Upright Man had arranged for one of the blockade ships to "drift" off station. Since learning the true situation, including Guy's plan to become Prince of Kronдор, the Upright Man had given over his not inconsiderable resources to aid the Prince's and Anita's escape. Anita wondered if anyone outside the Guild of Thieves would ever learn the mysterious leader's true identity. From what chance remarks Arutha had overheard, it seemed only a few within the Mockers knew who he was.

With Guy on his way back to the city, Jocko Radburn's men had increased their searching to a near-frenzied pitch. Curfew had been instituted and homes randomly entered and searched in the middle of the night. Every known informant in the city, and many of the beggars and rumormongers as well, had been dragged off to the dungeons and questioned, but whatever else Radburn's men accomplished, they did not learn where the Princess was hidden. No matter how much the denizens of the street feared Radburn, they feared the Upright Man more.

Anita heard Hull speaking quietly to Amos. "She's a blockade runner, called the Sea Swift, and she's well named. There's no faster ship left in the harbor, with all the big warships out with Jessup's fleet. You should make good time westward. The prevailing winds are northerly, so you'll have a broad reach most of the way."

Amos said, "Trevor, I've sailed the Bitter Sea a bit. I know how the winds blow this time of year as well as any man."

Hull snorted. "Well then, as you say. Your men and the Prince's gold are all safely aboard, and Radburn's watchdogs don't seem to have a notion. They still watch the Wind of Dawn like a mouser a rathole, but the Sea Swift is left alone. We've arranged for false papers to be posted with a broker, announcing she's for sale, so even if there was no blockade, they'd not imagine she'd be leaving harbor for some time."

They reached the docks and hurried along to a waiting longboat.

There were muffled noises, and Arutha knew the Mockers and Trevor's smugglers were disposing of Radburn's watchmen.

Then to the rear, shouts erupted. The clamor of steel broke the still of the morning, and Arutha heard Hull shout, "To the boat!"

The pounding of boots upon the wood of the docks set up a racket as Mockers came swarming out of nearby streets, intercepting whoever sought to cut off the escape.

They reached the end of the dock and hurried down the ladder to the longboat. Arutha waited at the top of the ladder until Anita was safely down, then turned. As he stepped upon the top rung, he heard the sound of hoofbeats approaching and saw horses crashing through the press of Mockers, who fell before the onslaught. Riders in the black and gold of Bas-Tyra hacked down with swords, to break free of those seeking to slow them.

Martin shouted from the boat, and Arutha hurried down the ladder.

As he reached the boat, a voice from above shouted, "Farewell!"

-, Anita looked up and saw Jimmy the Hand hanging over the edge of the dock, a nervous grin on his face. How the boy had managed to join

them when everyone thought him safely back at the hiding place, Arutha couldn't guess. Seeing the unarmed boy gave the Prince a momentary start. He unbuckled his rapier and tossed it high. "Here, use it in good health!" As quick as a striking serpent, Jimmy caught the scabbard, then vanished.

Sailors pulled hard against the oars, and the boat sped away from the docks. Lanterns appeared upon the wharves as the sound of battle became louder. Even in the predawn hour, many cries of "what passes?" and "Who goes there?" came from those set to guard ships and cargo in the harbor. Anita watched over his shoulder, trying to see what was occurring behind. More lanterns were

being brought and a fire erupted on the docks. Large bales of something, stored under canvas, exploded into flames.

Those in the boat could now clearly see the fight. Many of the thieves were escaping down city streets, or leaping into the icy water of the harbour. Arutha couldn't see the grey-haired figure of Trevor Hull anywhere, or the small one of Jimmy the Hand. Then clearly he saw Jocko Radburn, dressed in a simple tunic, as before. Radburn came to the edge of the dock and watched the retreating boat. He pointed at the fleeing longboat with his sword and shouted something lost in the clamour.

Arutha turned and saw Anita sitting opposite him, her cloak hood thrown back, her face clearly visible in the blaze of light from the wharf. Her gaze was caught by the spectacle on shore and she seemed unaware of her discovery.

Arutha quickly pulled her cloak hood about her face, snapping her from her glamour, but he knew the damage was done. He looked back again and saw Radburn ordering his men after the fleeing Mockers, retreating down the docks. He stood there alone, then turned away, vanishing in the gloom by the time the longboat reached the Sea Swift.

As soon as they were all aboard, Amos's crew cast mooring lines and scrambled aloft to set sails. The Sea Swift began to move from the harbor.

The promised gap in the harbor blockade appeared, and Amos set course for it. He was through before any attempt to cut them off could materialize, and suddenly they were outside the harbor, in the open sea. Arutha felt a strange elation as it struck him they were free of Krondor. Then he heard Amos swear. "Look!"

In the faint light of the false dawn, Arutha saw the dim shape where Amos pointed. The Royal Griffin, the three-masted warship they had seen when coming into the harbor, was at anchor beyond the breakwater, hidden from the view of any in the city. Amos said, "I thought her out with Jessup's fleet. Damn that Radburn for a crafty swine. She'll be on our wake as soon as he can get aboard." He shouted for all sails to be set and then watched the retreating ship behind. "I'd say a prayer to Ruthia, Highness. If we can steal enough time before she gets under way, we still may be free. But we'll need all the good fortune the Lady of Luck can spare."

THE MORNING WAS clear and cold. Amos and Vasco watched the crew work with approval. The less experienced men had been replaced by men handpicked by Trevor Hull. They did their work quickly and well, and the Sea Swift raced westward.

Anita had been shown to a cabin below, and Arutha and Martin stood on deck with Amos. The lookout reported the horizon clear.

Amos said, "It's a close thing, Highness. If they've gotten that brute of a ship underway as quickly as possible, we've only stole an hour or two on them. Their captain may choose the wrong course, but seeing as we're trying to stay free of Jessup's sea ambush, they're a good bet to follow close to the Keshian coast, and risk running into a Keshian warship, rather than losing us. I'll not feel comfortable until we're two days free of pursuit.

But even if they started at once, they'll only make up a small distance each hour. So until we know for certain they have us in sight, we'd all do with a bit of rest. Go below, and I'll call you should anything occur."

Arutha nodded and left. Martin followed. He bid Martin a good rest and watched as the Huntmaster entered the cabin he shared with Vasco. Arutha entered his own cabin and stopped when he saw Anita sitting on his bunk. Slowly he closed the door and said, "I thought you were asleep in your own cabin."

She shook her head slightly, then suddenly she was across the short space separating them, her head buried against his chest. Sobs shook her as she said, "I've tried to be brave, Arutha, but I've been so frightened.

He stood there awkwardly for a moment, then gently placed his arms around her. The self-reliant pose had crumbled, and Arutha now realised how young she was. Her court training and manners had served her well in maintaining poise among the rough company of the Mockers over the month, but her mask could no longer withstand the pressure.

He stroked her hair and said,

'You'll be fine.' he made other reassuring sounds, not aware of what he was saying, finding her closeness disturbing. She was young enough to make him judge her still a girl, but old enough to make him doubt that judgment. He had never been able to banter lightly with the young women of the court like Roland, preferring a straightforward conversation, which seemed to leave the ladies cold. And he had never commanded their attention the way Lyam had, with his blond good looks and his laughing, easy manner. On the whole women made him uncomfortable, and this woman - or girl, he couldn't decide which - more than usual.

When the tears subsided, he ushered her to the single chair in the cramped cabin and sat upon the bunk. She sniffed once, then said, 'I'm sorry, this is so unseemly.' Suddenly Arutha laughed. 'What a girl you are!' he said with genuine affection. 'Were I in your place, smuggling myself from the palace, hiding amid cutthroats and

thieves, dodging Radburn's weasels and all, I'd have fallen apart long since.'

She drew a small handkerchief from her sleeve and delicately wiped her nose. Then she smiled at him. 'Thank you for saying that, but I think you'd have done better. Martin has told me a lot about you over the last few weeks and you are a rather brave man by his accounts.'

Arutha felt embarrassed by the attention. 'The Huntmaster has a tendency to overboast,' he said, knowing it to be untrue, and changed the subject. 'Amos tells me if we don't sight that ship for two days, we'll have won free.' She lowered her eyes. "That's good."

He leaned forward and brushed a tear from her cheek, then, feeling self-conscious, pulled his hand away. "You will be safe with us in Crydee, free from Guy's plottings. My sister will make you a welcome guest in our house."

She smiled faintly. "Still, I am worried about Father and Mother." Arutha tried his best to lay her fears to rest. "With you safely gone from Krondor, Guy cannot gain by causing your parents harm. He may still force a consent to marry from your father, but Erland could do no harm by giving it now. With you out of reach, it's a hollow betrothal. Before this is all done, we shall have an accounting with dear cousin Guy."

She sighed, and her smile broadened. "Thank you, Arutha. You've made me feel better."

He rose and said, "Try to sleep. I'll use your cabin for the time being."

She smiled as she went to his bunk. He closed the door behind him. All at once he felt little need for rest and returned to the deck.

Amos stood by the helmsman, eyes fixed behind. Arutha came to stand at his side. Amos said, 'There, on the horizon, can you see it?'

Arutha squinted and made out a faint white speck against the blue of the sky. 'Radburn?'

Amos spat over the transom. "My guess. Whatever start we've had is being slowly eaten away. But a stern chase is a long chase, as the saying goes. If we can keep far enough ahead for the rest of the day, we might slip them at night if there's enough cloud cover so the moons don't mark our passage . '

Arutha said nothing, watching the faint speck in the distance.

Throughout the day they had watched the pursuing ship grow slowly in size. At first the tiny speck grew with maddening slowness, but now with alarming rapidity.

Arutha could see the sails clearly defined, no longer a simple blur of white, and he could see a hint of a black speck at the masthead, undoubtedly Guy's banner.

Amos regarded the setting sun, directly ahead of the fleeing Sea Swift, then watched the following ship. He shouted to the watch aloft, "Can you mark her?'

The lookout cried down. 'Three-masted warship



Captain.'

Amos looked at Arutha. "it's the Royal Griffin. She'll overtake us at sundown. If we had but ten more minutes or some weather to hide in, or she was just a tribe slower . . . '

"What can you do?'

"Little. In a broad reach she's faster, fast enough that

we can't shake her with any sort of fancy sailing. If I tried to turn to a beam reach just as she came near, I could put a bit of space between us, for we'd both lose speed, but she'd fall off faster for a time. Then as soon as they trimmed sails, they'd overhaul us. But that'd send us southward, and there're some fairly nasty shoals and reefs along this stretch of coast, not far from here. It'd be chancy. No, she'll come in somewhat to the windward. When she's alongside, her taller masts will cut our wind and we'll slow enough for them to board without so much as a by-your-leave.'

Arutha watched the closing ship for another half hour. Martin came on deck and watched as the distance between the two ships shrank by a few feet each minute. Amos held the ship tight to the wind, driving her to the limit of her speed, but still the other closed.

"Damn!" said Amos, nearly spitting from frustration. 'if

we were running east, we'd lose them in the dark, but westward we'll be outlined against the evening sky for some time after the sun sets. They'll still be able to see us when we'll be blind to them.'

The sun sank and the chase continued. As the sun neared the horizon, an angry red ball above the blackgreen sea, the warship followed by less than a thousand yards.

Amos said, 'They might try to foul the rigging or sweep the decks clear with those oversized crossbows, but with the girl aboard, Radburn might not risk it for fear of injuring her.'

Nine hundred, eight hundred yards, the Royal Griffin came on, rolling inexorably towards them. Arutha could see figures, small specks in the rigging, black against sails turned blood-red by the setting sun.

When the pursuing ship was five hundred yards behind the lookout shouted, 'Fog.'

Amos looked up. 'Where away?'

'South by west. A mile or more.'

Amos sped for the bow and Arutha followed. In the distance they could see the sun setting, while off to the left a hazy white band stretched across the top of the black sea. "Gods!" shouted Amos. 'We have a chance.'

Amos shouted for the helmsman to come to a southwest

heading, then sprinted for the stern, Arutha behind him by a step. When they reached the stern, they saw the turn had halved the distance between the ships. Amos said, "Martin, can you mark their helmsman?"

Martin squinted, then said, 'it's a bit gloomy, but he's no difficult mark.'

Amos said, "See if you can take his mind off holding course.'

Martin uncovered his ever present bow and strung it. He drew out a cloth-yard shaft and sighted on the pursuing ship. He waited, shifting weight to compensate for the rolling of the ship, then let fly. Like an angry bird, the arrow arched over the water, clearing the stern of the following ship.

Martin watched the shaft's flight, then quietly hummed an "Ah" to himself. In a single fluid motion he drew out another arrow, fitted it to the bowstring, pulled, and released. It followed the path of the first, but instead of clearing the rear of the other ship, struck in the transom, quivering mere inches from the helmsman's head.

From the Sea Swift they could see the Royal Griffins helmsman dive for the deck, releasing the tiller. The warship swung over and began to fall away. Martin said, "A little gusty for fine shooting," and sent another arrow to strike within inches of the first, keeping the tiller unmanned.

Slowly the distance between the ships began to widen, and Amos turned to his crew. "Pass the word. When I give the order for silence; any man who drops so much as a whisper is fish bait."

The warship wobbled behind a minute, then swung back on course. Martin said, "Looks like they'll keep a little less broad to us, Amos. I can't shoot through sails."

"No, but if you'd oblige me by keeping those lads in the bow away from their ballista, I'd be thankful. I think you irritated Radburn."

Martin and Arutha saw the ballista crew readying their weapons. The Huntmaster sent a flurry of arrows at the pursuing ship's bow, one arrow following the last before it was halfway to the target. The first struck a man in the leg, felling him, and the other men dived for cover.

'Fog dead ahead, Captain!' came the shout from above.

Amos turned to the helmsman. 'Hard to port.'

The Sea Swift angled to the south. The Royal Griffin came hard aftrr; now less than four hundred yards behind. As they changed course, the wind died. Approaching the fog bank, Amos said to Arutha, 'The wind'll fall off to less than a bilious fart in there; I'm reefing sail so the sound of flapping canvas doesn't give us away.'

Abruptly they entered a wall of grey, murky fog, qu black as the sun sank over the horizon. As soon as the warship vanished from sight, Amos said, "Reef sails!"

The crew hauled in sails, quickly slowing the ship. Then Amos said, "Hard to starboard, and pass the word for silence."

Suddenly the ship became graveyard quiet. Amos turned to Arutha and whispered, "There's currents here running to the west. We'll let them carry us away from here and hope Radburn's captain is a Kingdom Sea man."

"Tiller to midships," he whispered to the helmsman and said, "Pass the word to lash down the yards. And those aloft are to remain motionless."

Suddenly Arutha became aware of the quiet. After the clamor of the chase, with the fresh north wind blowing, the ropes and sheets singing in the yards, the canvas snapping constantly, this muffled fogbank was unnaturally silent. An occasional groan of a yard moving, or the snap of a rope, were the only sounds in the murk. Fear dragged the minutes out of the seemingly endless vigil.

Then, like an alarm ringing out, they heard voices and the sounds of a ship. Creaking yards and the snap of canvas as it moved in the faint wind echoed from all quarters.

Arutha couldn't see anything for a few minutes, until a faint glow pierced through the murk to the rear, passing from northeast to southwest, lanterns from the pursuing Royal Griffin. Every man aboard the Sea Swift, on deck and above, stayed at his station, afraid to move for the noise that would carry over the water like a clarion. In the distance they could hear a shout from the other ship, 'Quiet, damn it We can't hear them for our own noise!' Then it was suddenly still, save for the rippling of canvas and ropes from the Royal Griffin.

Time passed without measure as they waited in the blackness. Then came a hideous grinding sound, ringing like a thunder peal, a tearing, cracking shriek of wood being crushed. Instantly the cries of men could be heard, shouts of panic.

Amos turned to the others, half seen in the darkness. 'They've shoaled out. From the sound, they've torn the hull right out from under. They're dead men.' He ordered the helm put over to the northwest, away from the shoals and reefs, as sailors hurriedly set sail.

'A bad way to die,' said Arutha.

Martin shrugged, half lit by the lanterns being brought up on deck. 'Is there a good way? I've seen worse.' Arutha left the quarterdeck, the faint, pitiful cries of the drowning men still carrying across the water, a grisly counterpoint to Vasco's more mundane shout to open the galley. He closed the door to the companionway and shut out the unhappy sounds. He quietly opened the door to his cabin and saw Anita lying asleep in the faint light of a shuttered candle. Her red-brown hair looked nearly black as it lay spread about her head. He started to close the door, when he heard her say, 'Arutha?'

He stepped in, finding her watching him in the dim light. He sat on the edge of the berth. 'Are you well?' he asked. She stretched and nodded. 'I've been sleeping hard.' Her

eyes widened. 'is everything all right?' She sat up, bringing her face close to his.

He reached out and put his arms around her holding her close. "Everything is fine. We're safe now."

She sighed as she rested her head on his shoulder. "Thank you for everything, Arutha."

He said nothing, suddenly caught up in strong emotion, a protective feeling, a need to keep Anita from harm's way, to care for her. For long moments they sat this way, then Arutha regained control over his surging feelings. Pulling away a little, he said, "You'd be hungry, I'd think." She laughed, an honestly merry sound. "Why yes, as a matter of fact I'm famished."

He said, "I'll have something sent down, though it will be plain fare, I'm afraid, even compared to what you were given by the Mockers." "Anything."

He went on deck and ordered a seaman to the galley to fetch something for the Princess, then returned to find her combing her hair

"I must look a mess," she said.

Arutha suddenly found himself fighting the urge to grin.

He didn't know why, but he was inexplicably happy. 'Not at all,' he said. 'You look quite nice, actually.'

She stopped her combing, and Arutha marvelled at how she looked so young one minute, so womanly the next.

She smiled at him. "I remember sneaking a peek at you during Father's court dinner, when you were last in Krondor."

'At me? What in heaven's name for?'

She seemed to ignore the question. 'I thought you looked nice then as well, though a bit stern. There was a boy there who held me up to see. He was with your father's party. I've forgotten his name, but he said he was apprentice to a magician.'

Arutha's smile faded. "That was Pug."

"What ever happened to him?"

'He was lost in the first year of the war

She put aside her comb. 'i'm sorry. He was kind to a bothersome child.'

"He was a kind lad, given to doing brave things, and he

was very special to my sister. She grieved for a long time when he was lost.' Fighting back a gloomy mood, he said, "Now, why did a Princess of Krondor want to sneak a look

at a distant and rural cousin?'

Anita watched Arutha for a long moment, then said, 'I wanted to see you because our fathers thought it likely we would marry.'

Arutha was stunned. It took all his control to retain his composure. He pulled over the single chair and sat. Anita said, "Didn't your father ever mention it to you?"

For want of anything clever to say, Arutha merely shook his head. Anita nodded. "I know, the war and all. Things did get quite frantic soon after you left for Rillanon."

Arutha swallowed hard, finding his mouth suddenly dry. "Now, what is this about our fathers' plans for . . . our marriage?"

Arutha looked at Anita, her green eyes flickering with reflected candlelight, and something else. "Matters of state, I'm afraid. Father wanted my claim to the throne bolstered, and Lyam's too dangerous a match, being the elder. You'd be ideal, for the King would not likely object . . . or wouldn't have then, I guess. Now, with Guy set upon having me, I suppose the King is in agreement."

Arutha became suddenly irritated, though he wasn't certain why.

"And I suppose we're not to be consulted in the matter!" His voice rose. "Please, it's not my doing."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to alarm you. It's only I'd never given much thought to marriage, and certainly not for reasons of state." The wry grin reappeared. "That is usually the province of eldest sons. We second-born as a rule are left to get by as best we can, an old widowed countess, or a rich merchant's daughter." He tried to make light of it. "A rich merchant's beautiful daughter, if we're lucky which we usually are not." he couldn't manage a light tone and sat back. Finally he said, "Anita, you will stay at Crydee as long as need be. It may prove dangerous because of the Tsurani for a time, but we'll see that through, somehow. Send you down to Carss, perhaps.

When this war is over, you'll go home in safety, I promise you. And never, never shall anyone force you to do anything against your will." The conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door and a seaman entered with a steaming bowl of chowder, with hard bread and salted pork on a platter. As he placed the food on the table and poured a cup of wine, Anita watched Arutha. When the sailor was gone, Anita

began to eat. Arutha spoke of little things with Anita, finding himself

once more captivated by the girl's open, appealing manner. When he finally bade her good night and closed the door, he was abruptly aware the idea of a state marriage was causing him only a little discomfort. He went up on deck, the fog had lifted and once more they were running before a light breeze. He watched the stars above and, for the first time in years, whistled a happy

air.

Near the helm, Martin and Amos shared a wineskin and spoke low. "The Prince seems unusually cheerful tonight," said Amos.

Martin blew a puff of smoke from a pipe, which was quickly carried away on the wind. "And it's a good bet he's not even aware why he feels so cheerful. Anita's young, but not so young he'll be able to ignore her attentions for very long. If she's made up her mind, and I think she has,

she'll have him snared within the year. And he'll be glad to be caught." Amos laughed. "Though it will be some time before he owns up to it. I'm willing to wager young Roland is hauled up before the altar sooner than Anita."

Martin shook his head. "That's no wager. Roland's been caught for years. Anita has some work to do yet."

"You've never been in love, then, Martin?"

Martin said, "No, Amos. Foresters, like sailors, make poor husbands. Never at home long and spending days, even weeks, alone. Tends to make them a brooding, solitary lot. You?"

"Not so you'd notice." Amos sighed. "The older I get, the more I wonder what I've missed."

"But would you change anything?"

With a chuckle Amos said, "Probably not, Martin, probably not."

As The ship put in at the quayside, Fannon and Gardan dismounted. "Arutha led Anita down the gangway and introduced her to the Swordmaster of Crydee.

"We've no carriages in Crydee, Highness," Fannon said to her, "I'll have a cart sent for at once. It's a long walk to the castle."

Anita smiled. "I can ride, Master Fannon. Any horse that's not too spirited will do."

Fannon ordered two of his men to ride to the stable and bring one ~ of Carline's palfreys with a proper sidesaddle. Arutha asked, "What news?" Fannon led the Prince off a short distance and said, "A late thaw in the mountains, Highness, so there has been no major Tsurani movement as yet. A few of the smaller garrisons have been raided, but there is nothing to indicate a spring offensive here. Perhaps they'll move against your father."

"I hope you're right, for Father's received most of the Krondorian garrison." He quickly outlined what had occurred in Krondor, and Fannon listened closely.

"You did well not sailing for your father's camp. I think you judge things correctly. Nothing could prove more disastrous than a major Tsurani offensive against Duke Borric's position as he was marshaling to march against Guy. Let us keep this to ourselves for a time. Your father will learn what has occurred soon enough, but the more time it takes for him to discover Guy's treachery, the more chance we have of keeping the Tsurani at bay another year."

Arutha looked troubled. "This cannot continue much longer, Fannon.

We must soon see an end to this war." He turned for a moment and saw townspeople begin to gawk at the Princess. "Still, we at least have a little time to come up with something to counter the Tsurani, if we can but think of it."

Fannon thought a moment, started to speak, then stopped. His expression became grim, almost painful. Arutha said, "What is it, Swordmaster?"

I have grave and sorry news to greet you with, Highness. Squire Roland is dead."

Arutha was rocked by the news. For a brief moment he wondered if Fannon made some tasteless joke, for his mind would not accept what

he had heard. Finally he said, "What . . . how?"

"News came three days ago from Baron Tolburt, who is most sorely grieved. The Squire was killed in a Tsurani raid."

; Arutha looked at the castle upon the hill. "Carline?"

"As you would expect. She weeps, but she also bears up well."

"-Arutha fought back a choking sensation. His face was a grim mask as he moved back to Anita, Amos, and Martin. Word had spread that the princess of Krondor was upon the wharf. The soldiers who had ridden with Fannon and Cardan formed a quiet ring around her, keeping the townsfolk at a respectful distance, while Arutha shared the sad news with Amos and Martin.

Soon the horses arrived and they were in the saddle, riding towards the castle. Arutha spurred his horse on and was dismounted before the others had entered the courtyard.

Most of the household staff awaited him, and with little ceremony he shouted to Housecarl Samuel, "The Princess of Krondor is guesting with us. See rooms are made ready. Escort her to the great hall and tell her I will join her shortly." He hurried through the entrance of the keep, past

guards who snapped to attention as their Prince strode by

He reached Carline's suite and knocked upon the door.

'Who is it?' came the soft voice from within.

'Arutha.' The door flew open and Carline rushed into her

brother's arms, holding him tightly. "oh, I'm so glad you are back. You don't know how glad." She stepped back and looked at him. 'I'm sorry. I was going to ride down to meet you, but I just couldn't seem to gather myself together.'

'Fannon just told me. I'm so very sorry.'

She regarded him calmly, her face set in an expression of acceptance. She took him by the hand and led him to %pose."

She began to weep, and Arutha watched in silence. Quickly she regained control over herself and said, "No good comes from this, you know." She rose and looked out a window and said, quietly, "Damn this stupid war."

Arutha came over to her, holding her tightly for a moment. "Damn all wars," he said.

For a few more minutes they were quiet, then she said, "Now tell me, what news from Krondor?"

Arutha gave her a brief account of his experiences in Krondor, half his attention on her. She seemed much more accepting of Roland's loss than she had when grieving for Pug. Arutha shared her pain, but also felt certain she would be all right. He was pleased to discover just how much Carline had matured over the last few years. When he finished telling of Anita's rescue, Carline interrupted. "Anita, the Princess of Krondor, is here?"

Arutha nodded, and Carline said, "I must look a fright, and you bring the Princess of Krondor here. Arutha, you are a monster." She rushed to

a polished metal mirror and fussed with her face, daubing at it with a damp cloth.

Arutha smiled. Under the mantle of mourning, his sister still showed a spark of her natural spirit.

Combing her hair out, Carline turned to face her brother. "Is she pretty, Arutha?"

Arutha's wry smile was replaced by a grin. "Yes, I'd say she is pretty."

Carline studied Arutha's face. "I can see I'll have to get to know her well." She put down her comb and straightened her gown. Extending her hand to him, she said, "Come, we can't keep your young lady waiting

Hand in hand they left the room and walked down the stairs to the main hallway, to welcome Anita to Crydee.

26

Great One

AN ABANDONED HOUSE OVERLOOKED THE city.

The site upon which the house had been constructed had once seen the lights of a great family manse. On top of the highest of many rolling hills surrounding the city of Ontoset, it was considered the choicest view of the city and the sea beyond. The family had come to low estate, the result of being on the losing side in one of the Empire's many subtle but lethal political struggles. The house had fallen into disrepair and the property been ignored, for while it was as fine a building site as any found in the area, the association of ill fortune with the property was too real for the superstitious Tsurani.

One day news reached the city that some kula herders had awakened to the sight of a single black-robed figure walking up the hill toward the old house. They all acted with haste to avoid him, in the socially correct fashion for their station. They stayed within the area, tending their animals—the source of their meager income: kula wool-when, near midday, they heard a great noise, as if the heavens above them had erupted with the grandfather of all thunder peals. The herd scattered in terror, some running up the hill. The herders were no less terrified, but true to their trade, they put aside their fears and chased after the animals.

One herder, a man named Xanthis, came to the top of the once-famous hill to be greeted by the sight of the black-robed magician he was standing upon the crest. Where the run-down great house had been moments before, a large patch of smoking land was , several feet below the level of the grass that surrounded it.

He had intruded upon some business of a Great One, Xanthis began to back away, hoping to avoid detection, for the Great One's back was to the herder and his cowl was drawn over his head. As he took a step backward, the magician turned to face him, fixing him with a pair of unsettlingly deep brown eyes.

herd 1 d h' lf d d d



The herder lowered himself as custom demanded, on his knees, eyes downward. He did not fully abase himself, for he was a freeman, and while not a noble, he was head of his family.

"Get up," the magician ordered.

slightly confused, Xanthis rose, eyes still cast downward.

"Look at me."

He looked up and found the face in the cowl regarding him closely. A beard as dark as the eyes framed a fair face, a fact that added to Xanthis' discomfort, as only slaves wore beards. The magician smiled at his confusion and walked around the herder, inspecting him.

The magician saw a man tall for a Tsurani, an inch or two taller than five feet eight. His skin was dark, like unclouded chocha or

'His eyes were black, and his hair was black as well, save where it was streaked with white. The herder's short green robe revealed the power of a former soldier, a fact the magician gleaned from the man's posture and several scars. Past fifty he looked, but still capable of the strenuous life of a herder. Though shorter, this man resembled of Crydee slightly.

"Your name?" asked the magician, as he came round to stand before Xanthis answered, his voice betraying his unease. The magician startled him by asking, "Would you agree that this is a good place for a home, herdsman?"

Xanthis stammered, "If . . . if it . . . is your will,

the magician snapped, "Ask not what I think! I ask your thoughts!"

Xanthis could barely hide his anger at his own shame. Great Ones nct, and to be false with one was to do a dishonor. "Forgive i lgfJe. It is said this spot is ill favored by the gods."

"Who is it that says so?"

ess in the magician's voice caused the older man's head to as if he had been struck. His eyes hid little of his anger, but his voice remained calm as he said, "Those who live in the city, Great One, "What about the countryside." The herdsman met the magician's ld it.

The corners of the magician's eyes wrinkled in mirth, and his mouth turned up a little, but his voice still rang out. "But not you, herder?"

"I was fifteen years a soldier, Great One. I have found it often the case that the gods favor those who take care of their own welfare."

The magician smiled at this, though it was not an entirely warm expression. "A man of self-reliance. Good. I am glad we are of a like mind, for I plan to build my estate here, as I have a taste for the view of the sea."

A certain stiffness of posture in the herder's stance at this remark caught the magician's notice, and he said, "Have I your approval, Xanthis of Ontoset?"

Xanthis shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then said, "The Great One jests with me. My approval or disapproval is of no consequence, I am certain."

"True, but you still avoid my question. Have I your approval?"

Xanthis's shoulders sagged a little as he said, "I will have to move

my herds, Great One. That is all. I mean no disrespect."

"Tell me of this house, Xanothis, that stood here before this day."

"It was the home of the Lord of the Almach, Great One. He backed the wrong cousin against Almecho when the office of Warlord was contested."

He shrugged. "I was once a Patrol Leader of that house. I was a prideful man, which limited my advancement as a soldier. My lord gave me permission to leave his service and marry, so I took over my wife's father's herds. Had I stayed a soldier, I would now be a slave, dead, or a grey warrior." He glanced out toward the sea. "What more would you know, Great One?"

The magician said, "You may keep your herds upon this hill, Xanothis.

The grazers keep the grass neat, and I have no liking for unkempt grounds. Just keep them away from the main house where I will be working, else I cook one for my supper now and again."

Without another word, the magician pulled a device from within his robe and activated it. A strange hum was emitted for a moment; then the black-robed figure disappeared with a small popping sound. Xanothis stood quietly for a few minutes, then resumed his search of his lost animals.

Later that night, around a campfire, he told his family and the other herders of his meeting with the Great One. None doubted his word, for whatever his other faults might be, Xanothis was not one to expand upon the truth, but they were amazed. And they never quite got used to one other thing: over the following months while a new great house was being built, one or another of the herdsmen would occasionally catch sight of Xanothis engaged in conversation with a Great One, atop the hill while kula grazed below them.

Now A NEw and strange house stood atop the hill. It was the source of both some speculation and a little envy. The speculation was about its owner, the strange Great One. The envy was over its design and construction,

It was something of a revolution in Tsurani architecture. Gone was the traditional three-story, open-center building. In its place was a long, single-story building, with several smaller ones attached to it by covered walkways. It was a rambling affair, with many small gardens and waterways between the structures. Its construction was as much a sensation as its design, for it consisted mainly of stone, with fired brick tiles upon the roof. It was speculated that it offered cool protection during the heat of summer.

Two other facts added to the fascination evidenced over the house and its owner. First was the manner in which the project had been commissioned. The magician had first appeared in Ontoset one day, at the home of Tumacel, the richest moneylender in the city. He appropriated over thirty thousand imperials in funds, and left the moneylender stricken over his loss of liquidity. This was Milamber's method of dealing with the Tsurani passion for bureaucracy. Any merchant or tradesman commanded to render service to a Great One was forced to petition the

imperial treasury for repayment. This resulted in slow delivery of ordered materials, less than enthusiastic service, and resentment. Milamber simply paid in advance, and left it to the moneylender - who was better able to account for his losses than most other merchants, by nature of his bookkeeping - to recover from the treasury. The second fact was the style of decoration. Instead of the garishly bold wall paintings, the building was left mostly unpainted, except for an occasional landscape in muted, natural colours. Many fine young artists were employed on this project, and when it was done, the demand for their services was phenomenal. Within a month, a new wave in Tsurani art was in progress. Fifty slaves now worked the outlying fields, all free to come and go as they wished, dressed in the garb of their homeworld, Midkemia. All had been taken from the slave market one day, without payment, by the Great One. Many travellers to Ontoset would make an afternoon of climbing the hills nearby to see the house. From a respectable distance, of course.

Xanothis was questioned many times about the strange Great One who lived in that house, but the former soldier said nothing, only smiling a great deal.

"THE BELIEF that the current great rift to Midkemia is controllable is only partially correct." Milamber paused, allowing his scribe to finish copying the dictation. "It can be stated that rifts may be established without the release of destructive energies associated with their accidental creation, either through poorly effected magic spells or by the proximity of too many unstable magic devices."

Milamber's research into the special aspects of rift energies would be added to the Assembly's archives when completed. Like other projects he had read of in the archives, research into rifts had shown what Milamber took to be a grievous flaw in most of his brother magicians' work. In general, projects were not carried through to completion, showing a lack of thoroughness. Once the procedure to establish rifts safely had been developed, further research into their nature had been halted. Continuing, he dictated: "What is lacking in the concept of control is the ability to select the terminus of contact, the ability to 'target' the rift. It has been shown by the appearance of the ship carrying Fanatha on the shores of Crydee, on the world of Midkemia, that a certain affinity between a newly forming rift and an existing one is probable. However, as shown by further testing, this affinity is limited, such limits being as yet not fully understood. While there is increased probability of a second rift appearing within a regional proximity to the first, it is by no means a certainty."

When the scribe was caught up, Milamber added, "Also, there is a question of why rifts show certain inconsistencies. Size appears relative to the energy employed in their formation, but other characteristics seem without pattern. Some rifts are single direction"-Milamber had

lost several valuable devices discovering this fact-"while others allow movement in two directions. And then there are 'bonded pairs,' two single-direction rifts that appear simultaneously, both allowing one-way travel between origin and terminus. Though they may appear miles apart, they are related."

Milamber's narration was interrupted by the sound of the chimes~ announcing the arrival of someone from the Assembly. He dismissed his scribe and made his way to the pattern room. As he walked, he mused on the real reason for his submersion in research over the last two months. He was avoiding the decision he must soon make, whether or~ not to return to the Shinzawai estate for Katala. ':

Milamber knew there was a chance she had become the wife of another, for their separation had been nearly five years, and she would have no reason to think he'd ever be returning. But time and training had done nothing to dull his feelings toward her. As he reached the transporting room with its tiled pattern, he made his decision: tomorrow he would go to see her.

As he entered the room, he saw Hochopepa step off the pattern in the tile floor. "Ah," said the plump magician, "there you are. Since it has been two weeks since I last saw you, I decided to pay a visit."

"I am glad to see you. I have been deeply involved in study and could with a short respite."

they walked from the room into one of the several gardens nearby.

. Hochopepa said, "I have been meaning to ask you: what is the significance of the pattern you chose? I don't recognize it."

Milamber said, "It is a stylized recreation of a pattern I once saw in a fountain. Three dolphins."

"Dolphins?"

Milamber explained about the Midkemian sea mammals, while they seated themselves upon cushions between a pair of dwarf fruit trees.

"But why the dolphins from that fountain?"

"I don't know. A compulsion, perhaps. Also, when I underwent my testing on the tower, I saw something that didn't register for a month or two after."

"What does one have to do with the other?"

"During the representation of the final challenge to the Stranger, do you remember a single brown-robed magician, who bent the rift to keep

from entering the Enemy's universe?"

Hochopepa looked thoughtful. "I can't say as I do, Milamber. But the spell used to create that image affects each of us differently. If you share visions with others, you'll discover a great deal of variation. At the time of the Stranger, we were all black robes. who could this brown robed magician be?"

Pug said, "A man I have met, years ago."

"impossible. That scene took place centuries ago."

Milamber smiled and said, "Nevertheless, I have met him. I made my

" ~"~ three dolphins as something of a commemorative to our

%trange. There has been some speculation on time travel,

have to be the answer in this case, unless your barbaric ,

hlse with you upon the tower." He said the last with a

lapped his hands, and a servant arrived with a platter of  
The servant, Netoha, at one time had been hadonra for  
the family that resided there previously. Milamber had found him while  
securing someone to plant the varieties of vegetation he wanted in his  
gardens. The man was bold enough to approach, something that singled  
him out from the common Tsurani. Unable to find the work he was  
trained for since the demise of his employer's estate, Netoha had  
scratched out a meager living over the years. Milamber had taken him  
on as much out of sympathy as out of any real need. He had quickly  
made himself useful in a hundred ways the young magician had never  
dreamed of, and the relationship was mutually satisfactory.

Hochopepa took the offered sweets and drink. "I have come to tell  
you some news. There is to be an Imperial Festival in two months' time,  
with games. Will you come?"

Milamber found his curiosity piqued. With a wave he dismissed  
Netoha. "And what makes this festival so special? I can't remember  
having seen you so animated before."

"This festival is being given by the Warlord in honor of his nephew,  
the Emperor. He has plans for a new major offensive the week before  
the games, and it is hoped he will announce the success of the campaign."

He lowered his voice. "It is no secret to those with access to  
court gossip he is under a great deal of pressure to justify his conduct of  
the war before the High Council. Rumor has it he has been forced to  
offer major concessions to the Blue Wheel Party to regain their support  
in the war.

"But what will make the games unusual is that the Light of Heaven  
will leave his Palace of Contemplation, breaking with ancient tradition.  
It would be a proper occasion for you to make some sort of entrance  
into court society."

"I'm sorry, Hocho," Milamber said, "I have little desire to attend  
festivals. I have been to one earlier this month, in Ontoset, as part of  
my studies. The dances are boring, the food tends toward the awful,  
the wine is as flat as the speeches. The games are of less interest still.  
If this is the court society you speak of, then I'll be fine without it."

"Milamber, there are many holes left in your education. Gaining the  
black robe did not mean instant mastery of our craft. There is quite a  
bit more involved in protecting the Empire than sitting about dreaming  
up new ways of tossing energy around, or creating economic chaos with  
the local moneylenders." He took another sweet and returned to his  
chiding. "There are several reasons you must come with me to the  
festivities, Milamber. First, you are something of a celebrity to the  
nobles of the realm, for news of your wondrous house has spread from  
one corner of the Empire to the other, mostly by aid of those young  
bandits you paid so well to execute the delicate paintings you love so  
much. It is now considered the mark of some distinction to have the  
same sort of work done.

'And this place'-his hand inscribed an arc before them, mock wonder  
upon his face-"anyone who could be so clever to design such an  
edifice must surely be worthy of

attention.' His mocking tone vanished as he added, 'By  
the way, this entire bit of nonsense has not been diminished

one whit by your mysterious isolation here in the hinterlands. If anything, it has added to your reputation. 'Now to more important reasons than social ones. As you no doubt know, there is growing concern that the news from the war is somehow being downplayed. In all these years there has been little gain, and some talk is going about that the emperor may take a stand against the Warlord's policies. so ...' He let the thought go unfinished.

Milamber was silent for a time. "Hocho. I think it is time that I told you something, and if you feel it's sufficient to warrant my life, then you may return to the Assembly and bring charges.'

Hochopepa was raptly attentive. all quips and tart remarks put aside.

'You who trained me did your work well, for I am filled with a need to do what is best for the Empire. I hold only a little feeling for the land of my birth anymore, and you will never know what that signifies. But in the process of making me what I am, you could never create the love of home within my being that I once felt for my own Crydee. What you have created is a man with a strong sense of duty. untempered by any love for that thing he feels duty towards.' Hochopepa remained silent as the impact of what Milamber had said penetrated, then he nodded as Milamber continued.

'I may be the greatest threat to the Empire since the Stranger invaded your skies, for if I become involved with its politics I will be justice without mercy.

"I have known of the factions within the parties. the

crossover of families from one party to another, and the consequences of those acts. Do you think because I sit atop my hill in the eastlands, I am unaware of the shifts and stirrings of the political animals in the capital? Of course not. If the Blue Wheel Party collapses and its members realign with the War Party or the imperials, every street merchant in Ontoset is speculating on the news the next day in the marketplace. I know what is taking place as well as any other who is not directly involved. And in the months since I came to live here I have come to one conclusion: the Empire is slowly killing itself.'

The older magician said nothing for a moment, then asked, "Have you wondered at all why our system is such that we are killing ourselves?"

Milamber stood and paced a little. "Of course. I am studying it, and have chosen to wait before I act. I need more time to understand the history you taught me so well. But I do have some speculations of sorts on what's wrong, and they will give me a starting point." He inclined his head, asking if he should go on. Hochopepa nodded that he should. "It

seems to me there are several major problems here, problems I can only guess at in terms of impact upon the Empire.

"First"-he held up his index finger-"those in power are more concerned with their own grandeur than with the well-being of the Empire.

And as they are those who appear to the casual eye to be the Empire, it is an easy thing not to notice."

"What do you mean?" the older magician asked.

"When you think of the Empire, what comes to mind? A history of armies warring across the lands? Or the rise of the Assembly? Perhaps you think of a chronicle of rulers? Whatever it is, most likely the single most obvious truth is overlooked. The Empire is all those who live within its borders, from the nobles to the lowest servant, even the slaves who work the fields. It must be seen as a whole, not as being embodied by some small but visible part, such as the Warlord or the High Council.

Do you understand that?"

Hochopepa looked troubled. "I'm not sure, but I think . . . Go on."

~'If that is true, then consider the rest. Second, there must never be a time when the need for stability overrules the need for growth."

"But we have always grown!" objected Hochopepa.

"Not true," countered Milamber. "You have always expanded, and that seems like growth if you don't investigate closely. But while your armies have been bringing new lands into your borders, what has happened to your art, your music, your literature, your research? Even the vaunted Assembly does little more than refine that which is already known. You implied earlier that I was wasting my time finding new ways to 'toss energy around.' Well, what is wrong with that? Nothing. But there is something wrong with the type of society that looks upon the new as suspect.

"Look around you, Hocho. Your artists are in shock because I described what I had seen in paintings in my youth, and a few young artists became excited. Your musicians spend all their time learning the old songs, perfectly, to the note, and no one composes new ones, just clever variations on melodies that are centuries old. No one creates new epics, they only retell old ones. Hocho, you are a people stagnating. The war is but one example. It is unjustified, fought from habit, to keep certain groups in power, to reap wealth for those already wealthy, and to play the Game of the Council. And the cost! Thousands of lives are wasted each year, the lives of those who are the Empire, its own citizens. The Empire is a cannibal, devouring its own people."

The older magician was disturbed by what he heard, in total contradiction with what he believed he saw: a vibrant, energetic, alive culture.

"Thirdd" said Milamber, "if my duty is to serve the Empire, and the social order of the Empire is responsible for its own stagnation, then it is -: my duty to change that social order, even if I must destroy it."

Now Hochopepa was shocked. Milamber's logic was without fault, but the suggested solution was potentially fraught with danger to everything Hochopepa knew and revered. "I understand what you say, Milamber, but what you speak of is too difficult to contemplate all at once."

Milamber's voice took on reassuring tones. "I do not mean to imply that the destruction of the present social order is the only solution,

Hocho. I used that to shock and to drive home a point. That is what much of my research is about, not only the visible mastery of energy, but also investigations into the nature of the Tsurani people and the empire. Believe me, I am more than willing to spend as much time on this as I need. I plan on spending some time in the archives."

Hochopepa's brows furrowed, and he studied his younger friend's face. "d, you may find some unsettling things in those archives, d, your education is not complete."

Milamber let his voice drop. "I have already found some unsettling things, Hocho. Much of what is held to be common truth by the natives is based upon falsehoods."

Hochopepa became concerned. "There are things that are forbidden to all but members of the Assembly to know, Milamber, and even then it is unwise to speak about them to even one of your brethren." He looked away, thinking, then said, "Still, when you have finished prowling around in those musty old vaults, if you need to discuss your findings, I will be a willing ear." He looked back at his friend. "I like you and you're a refreshing change of pace for us, Milamber, but there are those who would rather see you dead as not. Don't go chattering on to anyone but Shimone or myself about this social research you're doing." But when I reach a judgment as to what must be done, I will act.'

an expression of concern on his face.

'it is not that I disagree with you, my friend, it is simply that I must have time to assimilate what you have said.'

'I could only speak the truth to you, Hocho, no matter how disturbing.'

Hochopepa smiled. "A fact I appreciate, Milamber. I must spend some time considering the proposition." Some of his usual humor crept back into his voice. "Perhaps you will accompany me to the Assembly? You have been absent much of the time with this house building and all; you would do well to put in an appearance now and again."

Milamber smiled at his friend. "Of course." He indicated that Hochopepa should lead the way to the pattern. As they walked, Hochopepa said, "If you wish to study our culture, Milamber, I still suggest you come to the Imperial Festival. There will be more political activity in the seats of the arena in that one day than could be observed in a month in the High Council."

Milamber turned toward Hochopepa. "Perhaps you're right. I will think about it."

When they appeared on the pattern of the Assembly, Shimone was standing close by. He bowed slightly in greeting and said, "Welcome. I was about to go looking for you two."

Hochopepa said with mild amusement, "Are we so vital to the business of the Assembly that you must be sent to fetch us back?"

Shimone inclined his head a little. "Perhaps, but not today. I merely thought you would find the business at hand interesting."

Milamber asked, "what is happening?"

"The Warlord has sent messages to the Assembly, and Hodiku raises questions about them. We best hurry, for they are nearly ready to ~



begin."

They walked quickly to the central hall of the Assembly and entered. Arrayed about a large open area was an amphitheater of open benches. they took seats in a lower row. Already several hundred black-ro Great Ones were in place. In the center of the floor they could see Fumita, the one-time brother of the Shinzawai lord, standing alone, he would be presiding over the business of the day. The presidency was allotted by chance to one of those in attendance. Milamber had seen Fumita in the Assembly only twice since being brought here.

Shimone said, "It has been nearly three weeks since I saw you in the Assembly, Milamber."

"I must apologize, but I have been busy getting my home in order."

"So I hear. You're something of a source of gossip in the imperial court. I hear the Warlord himself is anxious to meet you."

"Perhaps someday."

Hochopepa said to Shimone, 'Who can understand such a man? Taking to building such a strange home.' He turned to Milamber. "Next you'll be telling me that you're taking a wife.'

Milamber laughed. 'Why. Hocho. how did you guess?'

Hochopepa's eyes grew wide. 'You're not!'

'And why shouldn't !!'

'Milamber, it is not a wise course, believe me. To this day I have regretted my own marriage.'

'Hocho, I didn't know you were a married man.'

'I choose not to speak of it much. My wife is a fine woman, though given to an overly sharp tongue and scathing wit. In my own home I'm not much more than another servant to be ordered about. That is why I see her only on prescribed holidays; it would be bad for my nerves to see her more often.'

Shimone said, 'Who is your intended. Milamber? A noble daughter!'

'No. She was a slave with me at the Shinzawai estate.'

Hochopepa mused. 'A slave girl . . . hmm. That might work out.'

Milamber laughed. and Shimone chuckled. Several other magicians regarded them with curiosity, for the Assembly was not a regular forum for mirth.

Fumita held up his hand and the Assembly became quiet. 'Today there is a matter being brought before the Assembly by Hodiku.'

A thin Great One, with shaved head and hooked nose, walked from his seat in front of Milamber and Hochopepa to the centre of the floor.

He surveyed the magicians in the hall. then spoke. 'I come today so that I may speak about the Empire.' It was the formal opening of any business brought before the Assembly. 'I speak for the good of the Empire,' he added, completing the ritual. 'I am concerned about the demand

made today by the Warlord for aid so he may broaden the war against the Midkemian world.'

A chorus of jeers and cries of 'Politics' and 'Sit down,' Soon erupted from around the room. Shimone and Hochopepa were on their feet with others crying, "Let him speak!"

Fumita held up a hand for silence, and soon the room quieted. Hodiku continued, 'We are precedented. Fifteen years ago the Assembly sent an order to the Warlord to end the war against the Thuril Confederation.'

Another magician jumped to his feet. 'if the Thuril conquest had continued there would have been too few in the north to repulse the Thun migration that year. It was a clear case of the salvation of Szetac Province and the Holy City. Now our borders in the north are secure. The situation is not the same.'

Arguments erupted over the entire hall, and it took several minutes for Fumita to restore order. Hochopepa rose and said, "I would like to hear Hodiku's reasons for considering this request vital to the security of the Empire. Any magician who is willing is free to work on behalf of the conquest."

"That is the point," responded Hodiku. "There is no reason for any magician who feels this war into another space-time is right and proper for the Empire not to work in support of the conquest. Without the Black Robes who already serve the Warlord, the rift would never have been prepared for such an undertaking. It is that he now makes demands of the Assembly itself I find objectionable. If five or six magicians choose to serve in the field, even to traveling to this other world to risk their lives in the battle, then it is their own concern. But if one magician responds to this demand without considering the issues, it will appear the Assembly is now subject to the will of the Warlord."

Several magicians applauded this sentiment, and others seemed to weigh its merits. Only a few booed and jeered. Hochopepa stood again.

"I would like to offer a proposal. I will undertake on behalf of the Assembly to send a message to the Warlord expressing our regret that the Assembly as a body may not order any magician to perform as requested, but that he is free to seek the services of any magician willing" to work on his behalf."

A general murmur of approval ran through the room, and Fumita asked, "Hochopepa' offers a proposition to send a statement of policy to the Warlord on behalf of the Assembly. Does anyone find this objectionable?"

When no objections were forthcoming, he said, "The Assembly thanks Hochopepa for his wisdom."

He paused for a moment, then said, "Another matter needs our attention: the novice Shiro has been found lacking in the moral qualities necessary for the Greater Art. The mind probes reveal that he harbors anti-Imperial feelings, learned as a youth from his maternal grandmother, a Thuril woman. Is the Assembly agreed?"

hands were raised, and each bore a nimbus of light as the magician voted. Green for life, red for death, and blue for abstention. Milamber

obstained, but the vote was otherwise unanimous for death. One Blad rose, and Milamber knew that within minutes the novice would be stunned senseless, then teleported to the bottom of the lake, where his nerveless body would remain, too cold to rise to the surface.

After the meeting broke up, Shimone said, 'You should make a point of coming more often, Milamber. We hardly see you anymore. And you spend too much time alone.' Milamber smiled. 'That is true. but I plan to remedy the situation tomorrow.'

The chime sounded throughout the house, and servants jumped to make ready for the Great One's visit. Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai, knew that a Great One had struck a chime in the halls of the Assembly, willing the sound to come here, to announce his imminent appearance.

In Kasumi's room, Laurie and the elder son of the house sat 'engrossed in a game of pashawa, played with painted pieces of stiff paper. It was common to alehouses and inns in Midkemia and was one more detail in the young Tsurani's drive to master every facet of Midkemian life.

Kasumi stood. 'it is most likely he who once was my uncle, I had best go.'

Laurie smiled. 'Or could it be that you wish to stem ' your losses?'

The Tsurani shook his head. 'I fear I have created a 'problem in my own house. You were never a good slave, laurie, and if anything you have grown more intractable. it is a good thing I like you.'

They both laughed and the elder son of the house left. A few minutes later, a house'slave came running to Laurie and informed him that the lord of the house commanded him to come at once. Laurie jumped up, more from the slave's obvious agitation than from any inbred obedience. He hurried to the lord's room and knocked on the doorjamb. The door slid to one side and Kasumi held it. Laurie stepped through and saw the Shinzawai lord and his guest, and then confusion overtook him.

The guest was wearing the black robe of the Tsurani Great Ones, but the face was Pug's. He started to speak. stopped. and started again. "Pug?'

,The lord of the house looked outraged at this forward behaviour by the slave, but his nearly voiced command was stopped by the Great One . 'May I have the use of this room for a few minutes, lord? I wish to speak to this slave in private.'

Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai, bowed stiffly. 'Your will, Great One.' He left the room with his son behind; he was still in shock over the appearance of the former slave and confused at the conflicts within himself. The Great One he was, there could be no thought of fraud: his manner

of arrival proved it. But Kamatsu couldn't help feeling that his arrival heralded disaster for the plan he and his son had so carefully nurtured for the last nine years.

Milamber spoke. "Shut the door, Laurie."

Laurie shut it, then studied his former friend. He looked fit, but vastly changed. His bearing was nearly regal, as if the mantle of power he now wore reflected some inner strength he had lacked before.

Laurie began, then lapsed into silence, confused about what to say. Finally he said, "Are you well?"

Milamber nodded. "I am well, old friend."

Laurie smiled and crossed the room and embraced his friend, then pushed himself away. "Let me look at you."

Milamber smiled. "I am called Milamber, Laurie. The boy you knew as Pug is as dead as last year's flowers. Come, sit and we will talk."

They sat at the table and poured two cups of chocha. Laurie sipped at the bitter brew and said, "We heard nothing about you. After the first year I gave you up for lost. I'm sorry."

Milamber nodded. "It is the way of the Assembly. As a magician I am expected to forgo all my former ties, except for those that can be maintained in a socially acceptable manner. Being without clan or family, I had nothing to forgo. And you were always a poor slave who never knew his place. What better friend for a renegade, barbarian magician?"

Laurie nodded. "I am glad you have returned. Will you stay?"

Milamber shook his head no. "I have no place here. Besides, there is work I must be about. I now have an estate of my own, near the city of Ontoset. I have come for you. And Katala, if . . ." His voice trailed off, as if he were fearful of asking about her.

Sensing his distress, Laurie said, "She is still here and has not taken husband. She would not forget you." He broke into a grin. "Gods of Midkemia! It completely slipped my mind. You would have no way of knowing."

"What?"

"You have a son."

Milamber sat dumbstruck. "A son?"

Laurie laughed. "He was born eight months after you were taken. He is a fine boy, and Katala is a fine mother."

Milamber felt overwhelmed at the news and said, "Please. Would you bring her here?"

Laurie jumped to his feet. "At once."

He rushed from the room. Milamber sat fighting down the upsurge of emotion. He composed himself, using his magician's skills to relax his mind. The

door slid open, and Katala was revealed, uncertainty on her face.

Laurie stood behind, a boy of about four in his arms.

Milamber rose and spread his arms to her. Katala rushed to him, he nearly cried in his joy. They clung quietly for a moment, then she murmured, "I thought you gone. I hoped . . . but I thought you gone."

They stood for several minutes, each lost in the pure pleasure of the other's presence, until she pushed herself away. "You must meet your son, Pug."

Laurie brought the boy forward. He regarded Milamber with large brown eyes. He was a well-formed boy, with a stronger likeness to his mother, but something in the way he tilted his head made him resemble the boy from Crydee keep. Katala took him from Laurie and passed him to Milamber. "William, this is your father."

The boy seemed to take this in with some skepticism. He ventured a shy smile, but leaned back, keeping his distance. 'I want down,' he said abruptly. Milamber laughed and put the boy down. He looked at his father, then immediately lost interest in the stranger in black. 'Ooh!' he cried, and rushed over to play with the Lord of the Shinzawai's shah pieces.

Milamber watched him for a 'moment, then said 'William?'

Katala stood next to him with her arm around his waist hugging him as if afraid he would disappear again. Laurie said, "She wanted a Midkemian name for him, Milamber.' Katala started. 'Milamber?'

'It is my new name, love. You must get used to calling me that.' She frowned, not entirely pleased with the thought. 'Milamber,' she repeated. testing the sound. She then shrugged. 'It is a good name.'

'How did he become William?'

Laurie went over to the boy, who was trying to stand the pieces one atop the other, and gently took them away. The boy threw him a black look. 'I want to play,' he said indignantly.

Laurie picked him up and said, 'I gave her a bunch of names and she picked that one.'

'I liked its sound,' she said, "Will

At the sound of his name the boy looked at his mother 'i'm hungry.'

.I favoured James of Owen, but she insisted,' Laurie said. while the boy tried to wriggle out of his arms.

Katala took him. 'I must feed him. I'll take him to the kitchen.' She kissed Milamber and left the room.

The magician stood quietly for a moment. 'It is all more than I had hoped for. I was afraid she'd have found another.'

"Not that one. - Milamber. She would have nothing to do with any of the men who paid court to her, and there were a few. She's a good woman. You need never doubt her.'

"I never will, Laurie."

They seated themselves, a discreet cough at the door made them turn. Kamatsu stood at the door. "May I enter, Great One?"

Milamber and Laurie started to rise, and the lord of the house waved them back into place. "Please, stay seated." Kasumi entered behind his father and closed the door. Milamber noticed for the first time that the son of the house was wearing garments that were Midkemian in fashion. He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

The head of the Shinzawai family looked deeply troubled and tried to collect his thoughts. After a few moments he said, "Great One, may I be frank with you? Your arrival today is something unexpected and the source of some possible difficulty."

"Please," said Milamber. "I do not intend to cause disruption in your household, lord. I want only my wife and son. And I will require this \_ slave also." He indicated Laurie.

"Your will, Great One. The woman and the boy should, of course, go with you. But if I may beg of you, please allow the slave to remain." Milamber looked from face to face. The two Shinzawai maintained control, but by the way they glanced from one to the other and at Laurie, their distress was poorly hidden. Something had changed here in the last five years. The relationship between the men in the room was not what it should have been between masters and slave.

"Laurie?" Milamber looked at his friend.-"what is this?"

Laurie looked at the other two men, then at Milamber. "I will have to ask you to promise me something."

Kamatsu's shock was signaled by a sharp intake of breath. "Laurie. You dare too much. One does not bargain with a Great One. His words are as law."

Milamber held up a hand. "No. Let him speak."

In imploring tones Laurie said to his friend, "I know little of these matters, Milamber. You know I have no sense about protocol. I may be violating custom, but I ask you for the sake of our former friendship, will you keep a trust and vow to keep what you hear in this room to yourself?"

The magician pondered the matter. He could command the Shinzawai lord to tell all, and the man would, as automatically as a soldier following orders, but his friendship with the troubadour was important to him. "I give you my word that I will not repeat what you tell me."

Laurie gave a sigh and smile, and the Shinzawai seemed to lose some of their tension. Laurie said, 'I have struck a bargain with my lord here. when we have completed certain tasks, I am to be given my freedom.'

Milamber shook his head. 'That is not possible. The law does not permit a slave to be freed. Even the Warlord cannot free a slave.'

Laurie smiled. 'And yourself?'

Milamber looked stern. 'I am outside the law. None can command me. Are you claiming to be a magician?'

'No, Milamber, nothing like that. It is true that I can only be a slave here. But I won't be here. I will return to Midkemia.'

Milamber looked puzzled. 'How is that possible? There is only one rift into Midkemia, and that is controlled by the Warlord's pet magicians. There are no others, or I would know of them.'

'We have a plan. It is involved and will take much explaining, but simply put, it is this: I will accompany Kasumi, disguised as a priest of Turakamu the Red. He will be leading soldiers replacing troops at the front. No

one is likely to notice my height, for the Red One's priests are given wide berth. The troops are all loyal to the Shinzawai. Once in Midkemia, we will slip through the lines and find our way to the Kingdom forces.'

Milamber nodded. 'Now I understand the language lessons and the clothes. But tell me, Laurie. Are you willing to spy for the Tsurani in exchange for your freedom?' There was no disapproval in his voice. it was a simple question.

. Laurie flushed. 'I am not going as a spy. I am going as a guide. I am to take Kasumi to Rillanon, for an audience with the King.'

.Why?' Milamber was surprised.

Kasumi interrupted. 'I go to meet the King and bring him an offer of peace.'

Milamber raised an argument. 'How can you possibly expect to end the war with the War Party still in control of the High Council?'

'There is one thing in our favour.' responded Kamatsu.

'This war has lasted for nine years, and the end is nowhere in sight. Great One, I don't presume to instruct you, but if I may explain some things?'

Milamber nodded that he should continue. Kamatsu sipped his drink and went on. 'Since the end of the war with the Thuril Confederation, the War Party has been pressed to maintain its dominance over the High Council. Each border clash with Thuril brought the call for a renewal of the conflict. Between the fighting on the border, and the constant attempts by the Thun to break through the passes in the north and regain their former southern range, the War Party managed barely to maintain a majority. A coalition led by the Blue Wheel Party was on the verge of dislodging them ten years ago, when the Assembly discovered the rift into your former homeland. The call for war rang out in the council as soon as the rich metals of your homeland were known to exist. All the progress we had made over the years was lost in that instant.

"So we began at once to counter this madness. The metals being mined on your former world are, from what Laurie has told us, the leavings of abandoned mines, not considered worth the bother by those you call dwarves. There is nothing in this for Tsuranuanni but an excuse to raise the War Banner again and shed blood.

"You know our history. You know how difficult it is for us to settle our differences in a peaceful manner. I have been a soldier and know the glories of war. I also know its waste. Laurie has convinced me that my suspicions about those who live in the Kingdom were correct. You are not a very warlike people, in spite of your nobles and their armies. You would have been willing to trade."

Milamber interrupted. "This is all true. But I am not sure that it has any bearing on things as they stand now. My former nation had not fought a major war in nearly fifty years, except for skirmishes with the

goblins of the north and along the Keshian border. But now the battle drums sound in the West. The Armies of the Kingdom have been blooded. The nation has been invaded without cause. They would not, I think, be willing simply to stop and forgive. There would be demands for retribution, or at least reparation. Would the High Council be willing to surrender the honor of Tsuranuanni and make restitution for the wrong done at the hands of its soldiers?"

The Shinzawai lord looked troubled. "The council would not, I am sure. But the Emperor would."

"The Emperor?" Milamber said, surprised. "what has he to do with this?"

"Ichindar, may heaven bless him, feels the war is bleeding the Empire of its resources. when we campaigned against the Thuril, we learned that some frontiers are simply too vast and far from the Empire to control. the Light of

Heaven understands that nowhere could there be a frontier as vast or far as that we have found on Midkemia. He is taking a hand in the Game of the Council. It is perhaps the greatest game ever played in the history of Tsuranuanni.

The Light of Heaven is willing to command the Warlord to peace, to have him removed from office if need be. But he will not take the risk of so great a break with tradition unless he is guaranteed the willingness of King Rodric to come to terms. He must go before the High Council with 'peace a fait accompli, otherwise he risks (too much.

'Regicide has been committed only once in the history of the Empire, Great One. The High Council hailed the killer and named him Emperor. He was the son of the man he slew. His father had tried to order taxes imposed upon the temples, the last time an Emperor played in the Game of the Council. We can be a hard people, Great One, even with ourselves, and never has an Emperor sought to do what Ichindar seeks, what others, many others, will see as laying down the honour of the Empire, an unthinkable act.

'But if he can deliver peace to the council, then it will clearly show the gods give their blessing to such an undertaking, and none will dare challenge him.'

'You risk much, Lord of the Shinzawai.'

'I love my nation and the Empire, Great One. I would willingly die in the field for her, and I risked that often when I was younger, during the Thuril campaigns. I would also risk my life, my sons, the honour of my house, family, and clan to bring the Empire to sanity. As would the Emperor. We are a patient people. This plan is years in preparation. The blue Wheel Party has long been secretly allied with the Party for Peace. We withdrew in the third year of the war to embarrass the Warlord and set the stage for Kasumi's training for the coming journey. Over a year



was spent in travelling to various lords within the Blue Wheel and Peace parties, ensuring cooperation, that every member would play his part in the Game of the Council, before you and Laurie were brought here to be his tutors.

'We are Tsurani, and the Light of Heaven would not allow an overture to be made until he had a ready messenger. We have made Kasumi that messenger, seeking to give him the best possible chance of reaching your former King safely. It must be this way, for should any outside our faction learn of the attempt if it fails, many heads, including my own, would fall, the price of losing the game. If you take Laurie away, Kasumi has little chance of reaching your former King, and the peace effort will be postponed until we can find another trustworthy guide, a delay almost certain to last one or two more years. The situation is now critical. The Blue Wheel Party is again part of the Alliance for War, after years of negotiating with the War Party, and thousands of men are being sent to fight so that Kasumi may slip through Kingdom lines into your former homeland. The time will soon be ripe. You must consider what even another year of war would mean. With the conquest of your former homeland, the Warlord could become invulnerable to any move we may make.'

Milamber considered, then to Kasumi said, 'How soon?'

Kasumi said. 'Soon, Great One, a matter of weeks. The Warlord has spies everywhere and has some hint of our plans. He has little trust of the Blue Wheel's sudden shift in the council, but he cannot refuse the aid. He feels the need to strike a great victory. He plans the major spring offensive against the forces of Lords Borric and Brucal, the Kingdom's main strength. It will be timed to occur just before the Imperial Festival, orchestrated so he can announce the victory at the Imperial Games, for his own personal glory.'

Kamatsu said, "It is much like an end-game gambit in shah, Great One. A smashing victory will gain the Warlord all he needs to take control of the High Council, but we risk this to play for our final move. The front will be in confusion as preparations are being made for the offensive.

Kasumi and Laurie will have their best opportunity to slip through the lines. Should King Rodric agree, then the Light of Heaven can appear in the High Council with an announcement of peace, and all that the Warlord's power and influence is based upon will crumble. In terms of shah. we expose our last piece to capture so that our

Emperor may checkmate a Warlord.'

Milamber was thoughtful for a time. 'I think you have

embarked on a bold plan, Lord of the Shinzawai. I will honour my pledge to say nothing. Laurie may continue here.' He looked at Laurie. 'May the gods of our forefathers protect you and bring you success. I pray this war may end soon.' He stood up. 'if you don't mind, I will take my leave. I would have my wife and child home now.' Kasumi rose and bowed. 'i should like to say one thing more, Great One.'

Milamber indicated he should proceed. 'Years ago, when you asked for Katala for your wife, and I told you the request would be refused, I also told you there was a reason. It was our plan you would also return to your homeworld. I trust you understand that now. We are a hard people, Great One, but not cruel.'

'It was apparent as soon as the plan was revealed.' He looked at Laurie. 'For what I am now, this is my homeland. but there is still a part of me unchanged within, and for that reason I envy you your homecoming. You will be well remembered, old friend.'

So saying, Milamber left the room. Outside the great house he found Katala waiting in a garden, watching their son at play. She came to him and they embraced, savouring sweet reunion. After a long moment he said, 'Come beloved, let us take our son home.'

27

## Fusion

Longbow wept in silence.

Alone in a glade near the edge of the elver forests, the huntmaster of Crydee stood over three fallen elves. Their lifeless 'bodies lay sprawled upon the ground with arms and legs bent at impossible angles, their fair faces covered in blood. Martin knew what death meant to the elves, where one or two children to a family in a century was the norm. One face he knew well, Algavins, Galain's companion since boyhood, less than thirty years of age, still a child by the elver folk's measure.

Footsteps from behind caused Martin to wipe away the tears and resume his usually impassive expression. From behind he heard Garret say, 'There's another bunch down the trail, Huntmaster. The Tsurani went through this part of the forest like a bad wind.'

Martin nodded, then set out without comment, Garret following. For all his youth, Garret was Longbow's best tracker, and they both moved lightly along the trail towards Elvandar.

After travelling for hours, they crossed the river west of a Tsurani enclave, and when they were safely into the elver forests, a voice hailed them from the trees. "Well

met, Martin Longbow.'

Martin and Garret halted and waited as three elves appeared from among the trees, seemingly forming out of the air. Galain and his two companions approached the Huntmaster and Garret. Martin inclined his head slightly back toward the river and Galain nodded. It was all the communication they needed to exchange the fact both knew of Algavins' death, along with the others. Garret noticed the exchange, though he was far from conversant with the subtleties of elvish ways.

'Tomas? Calin?' asked Martin.

'In council with the Queen. Do 'you bring news?'

'Messages from Prince Arutha. Are you bound for council?'

Galain smiled the elvish half-smile that indicated ironic humour. 'It has fallen to us to guard the way. We must remain for a time. We will come as soon as the dwarves cross the river. They are due anytime now.'

The comment was not lost on Martin as he bade them good-bye and continued towards Elvandar. Approaching the clearing surrounding the elvish tree-city, he wondered at the exclusion of Galain and the other young elves from council. They were all the constant companions of Tomas since he came to take up permanent residency in Elvandar.

Martin had not been there since just before the siege of Crydee, but in those years he had spoken to some of the Natalese Rangers who ran messages from the Duke to Elvandar to Crydee. On several occasions he had spent hours talking with Long Leon and Grimsworth of Natal. While closemouthed when not among their own kind they were less guarded with Longbow, for in the Huntmaster of Crydee they sensed a kindred spirit. He was the only man not a Ranger of Natal who could enter Elvandar unbidden. The two Natalese Rangers had indicated great changes in the Elf Queen's court, and Martin felt a strange sort of silent disquiet.

As they approached Elvandar in an easy, loping run, Garret said, "Huntmaster, will they not send someone to fetch the fallen?'

Martin stopped and leaned upon his bow. "Garret, it is not their way. They will let the forest reclaim them, for they believe their true spirits are now abiding in the Blessed Isles." He thought a moment, then said, "Among my trackers, you are perhaps the best I've known." The still young man blushed at the compliment, but Longbow said, "No flattery, but simply fact. I mention it because you are the one most likely to replace me should anything happen."

Garret's usual hangdog expression gave way to one of close attention to what Martin was saying. Martin continued, "If something should occur that takes me from this life, I would hope that someone would continue to keep Elvandar and the human world from drifting apart." Garret nodded. "I think I understand."

"You must, for it would be a sad thing for the two races to grow away from one another." He spoke softly. "About their beliefs you must learn as you can, but a few things you should know, especially in this time you remember how it is claimed that certain priests can recall %they are no more than an hour departed?"

d, "I have heard the story, but I have never met anyone who ave seen it done, or even claims to know someone who has Father Tully says so, and he's not the sort to be less than matters of faith." Martin looked down at the soil. "There important priest~f which order I do not know-found Fown away from the gods and caught up in the human world. oH his 6ne robes and golden ornaments and donned the simple pun of an itinerant monk. He wandered the wilderness, seeking ty. Time and chance brought him to Elvandar, where he came a newly fallen df, dead by accident but a few minutes before the arrived. He began to recall the elf from death, for he was a priest t powers, and sought to share his abilities with all in need. He halted by the elf's wife, and when he asked her why, she said, 'It is our way. He is now in a far better place, and should you recall him, not return but against his will and to our sorrow. That is why we cannot speak his name, lest he hear longing in our voices and return to rt us at cost of his own.' From what I know, no Elf has ever been from death.

ve been told by some that no elf can be revived by human arts. have said that elves have no true souls, which is why they do not are false, and they have a finer sense of where they

for a moment while he digested this information.  
b h '

a strange tale, Huntmaster. what brought it to mind?"  
death of those elves and your question. It is to show you how r from us, and how you must work to learn their ways. You will time among them."

' the tale of the dead elf true?"

The newly fallen elf was the late Elf King, Queen Aglaranna's I was but a boy then, thirty years ago, but I remember it. I was hunting party when the accident happened, and I met the

said nothing, and Martin picked up his weapon and resumed ey.

They soon came to the edge of Elvandar. Martin stopped when Garret stood enraptured by the sight of the great trees. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows through the forest, but the high boughs were already glimmering with their own fairy light.

Martin took Garret by the elbow and gently guided the gawking tracker along to the queen's court. He reached the council ring and entered, saluting the Queen.

Aglaranna smiled at sight of him. "Welcome, Martin Longbow. It has

been too long since you last came to us."

Martin introduced Garret, who bowed awkwardly before the queen. Then another figure entered the court, from where he had stood in the shadows.

Martin had grown alongside elven children and was as able as any man in hiding his emotions when need be, but the sight of Tomas rocked him to the point of nearly exclaiming. Biting back a comment, he forced himself not to stare and heard Garret's indrawn breath of amazement. They had heard of the changes in Tomas, but nothing had prepared either Martin or Garret for the sight of the towering man before him. Alien eyes regarded them. There was little remaining of the happy, grinning boy who had once followed Martin through the woods begging for tales of the elves, or played barrel ball with Garret. Without cordiality Tomas stepped forward and said, "what word from Crydee?" Martin leaned upon his bow. "Prince Arutha sends his greetings," he said to the queen, "and his affections, as well as his hope for your good health. "

Turning to Tomas, who had obviously usurped some position of command within the Queen's council, he said, "Arutha sends the following news: Black Guy, Duke of Bas-Tyra, now rules in Krondor, so no help will be forthcoming to the Far Coast. Also, the Prince has good cause to believe the outworlders plan to mount a major offensive soon, whether against Crydee, Elvandar, or the Duke's army he cannot tell. However, the southern enclaves are not being reinforced through the dwarven mines, though they are strongly dug in. My trackers have had some signs of northward movement, but nothing on a large scale. It is Arutha's guess the most likely offensive will be against his father and Brucal's army." Then he said, "And I bring word that Arutha's Squire ' has been slain." He observed the elven avoidance of naming the dead. Tomas's eyes betrayed a glint of emotion at the news of Roland's death, but all he said was, "In war men die."

Calin realized the exchange was something of a personal matter between Longbow and Tomas. No one else in the court had known Roland well, though Calin remembered him from the dinner that night many years ago in Crydee. Martin was troubled by Tomas's reaction to the news of his boyhood friend's death. Returning to the business of war, he said, 'it is a logical thing. Should the Kingdom army in the West be broken, the outworlders could then turn their full attention on the other fronts, gaining the Free Cities and Crydee quickly. Within a year, two at the most, all of what once was Keshian Bosnia would be under their banners. Then they could march easily upon Yabon. In time they could march to the gates of Krondor.'

Tomas faced Calin, as if to speak, his eyes narrow. A flash of communication passed between the Queen and Tomas, and he stepped back into his place in the council circle. Calin continued, 'if the outworlders are not staging to the west of the mountains, then we should be joined by the dwarves soon. We've had sorties across the river from the outworlders, but no sign of major attacks to come. I

think Arutha is correct in his surmise, and should the Dukes call, we should try to aid them.'

Tomas turned upon the Elf Prince. 'Leave Elvandar unprotected!' his face showed outrage. Martin was startled by the ferocity of Tomas's barely checked anger. "Without stripping the elver forests of defenders, we could not mount enough numbers to matter in such a battle.'

Calin's face remained impassive. but his eyes mirrored Tomas's anger. His words came forth quietly. 'I am Warleader of Elvandar. I would not leave our forests unprotected. But should the outworlders mount a major offensive against the Dukes they will not leave sufficient soldiers along the river to menace our forests. They have not come against us since we 'defeated them with the sorcerer's aid and their black Robes were killed. But should they battle Lords Borric and Brucal, and should the battle be a close thing, our numbers might tip the balance.'

Tomas maintained his self-control. standing rigidly for a moment, then in icy tones he said, 'The dwarves follow Dolgan, and Dolgan follows my lead. They will not come unless I call them to battle.' Without another word he left the council circle.

Martin watched Tomas leave. His skin crawled as he felt for the first time the power contained within this strange blend of man and whatever else lived inside the boy from Crydee. He had only caught a glimpse of what was within Tomas, but it had been enough. Tomas was a being to be feared.

Martin then saw a flicker of expression on Aglaranna's face. She rose and said, 'I had better have words with Tomas. He has been overwrought of late.'

As she left, Martin was struck by a certainty. Whatever else he had seen, he had witnessed a conflict between the Elf Queen's son and her lover, and a deep conflict within herself, as well. Aglaranna had worn the expression of one caught in a hopeless fate.

when the Queen had left, Calin said, "You have come at a propitious time, Martin. We have need of your wisdom."

He sent Garret away to get something to eat, and when he was gone, Martin studied the Elf Prince, then the others in the council. Tathar stood at his usual place, to the right of the Queens throne. Others he knew, all old and trusted advisers of the queen. Many were ancient Spellweavers.

Martin sat down, patiently waiting for Calin to speak. The Elf Prince remained silent for a time. Martin studied Calin, for he knew him and could sense his disquiet. As a boy, Martin had thought the Elf Prince the finest embodiment of all elven virtues. while his boyish hero worship had passed, he still regarded Calin with undiminished respect.

Calin said, "Martin, of all here you are the only one to have known Tomas before this change. what can you say of the transformation you've seen?"

Martin spent time considering his reply. "I have only glimpsed these changes over the years, until this day. That they are great is obvious. But as to what they herald, I cannot begin to guess. He was a good enough ~ boy, one not overly given to mischief, though with enough curiosity to find it. He had a tender side and did not hold back in his affections. His temper was moderate, though he could lose control when a friend was threatened or struck. In all, he was much like other boys, a dreamer." "And now?"

Martin was troubled and took no pains to hide this. "He is something beyond my understanding."

Tathar said, "Your words are clear to us, Martin, and true, for he has also gone beyond our understanding."

Calin spoke softly. "Of men, you know our history more than any. You know of our hatred for the ages spent in bondage to the Valheru. You know we reject the Dark Path they trod. We fear the return of the power as much as we do this invasion of outworlders and their Black Robes. You have seen Tomas. You must know what we are forced to consider." Martin nodded. "Yes. You weigh his life."

"Many of the younger elves follow him blindly," said Tathar.

lack the maturity and wisdom to withstand the subtle influence of the Valheru magic with him. And while the dwarves do not follow blindly, still they follow, for they have none of our heritage of fear, and they have

great faith in his leadership. He has proved the means of their survival for eight years now, saving many of them from death repeatedly.

"But while Tomas has been a boon to us in this struggle against invaders, we may have to put aside all other considerations save will this half man, half Valheru attempt to become our master?" Tathar frowned. "If so, he must be destroyed."

Martin felt cold inside. Of all the boys he had known at Crydee he had held special affection for three, Garret, Tomas, and Pug. He had mourned silently when Pug had been taken by the Tsurani, and had often wondered if it had been to his death or captivity. Now he mourned for Tomas, for whatever else might occur, Tomas would never again be as he once was.

Martin said to Calin. "Can nothing be done?"

Calin indicated Tathar should answer the question. The old Spellweaver looked around the circle, gaining silent agreement from the other Spellweavers. To Martin he said, "We do what we can to bring this to a good ending. But should the Valheru come forth in his might, we would not withstand, so we are fearful. We harbor no hatred for Tomas. But even as you pity a rabid wolf, you must kill it."

Martin looked grimly out at the lights of Elvandar, as darkness deepened.

As long as he remembered, it had been a comforting sight. Now he felt only cold bitterness. "when shall you decide?"

Tathar said, "You understand our ways. We shall decide when we must decide."

Martin rose slowly to his feet. "My counsel to you then is this: until this change has clearly shown itself to be toward the Dark Path, do not . mistakenly give too much weight to ancient fears. I have long been thought that those who now rule in Elvandar are of heartier nature and

. more independent mind than those who were first set free by the Valheru. Stay your hand until the last. Something good may come of this yet, or if not that, something that is not entirely ill."

Tathar nodded. "Your counsel is given well. It is well received."

--~"Martin looked heavily burdened. "I will do what I can. Once I was able to influence Tomas, perhaps I may yet again. I will go meditate on the matter then seek him out and speak with him." None of the elves around the Queen's court spoke as he left. They knew his heart was as troubled as their own.

The throbbing had become worse. not quite a pain, but discomfort that grew unnervingly more persistent. Tomas sat in the cool glade, near the quiet pool, struggling within himself. Since coming to live in Elvandar, he had found his dreams little more than vague shadowy images, with half-remembered phrases and names to grasp. They were less troublesome, less fearful, less a presence in his daily life, but the pressure within his head, the dull near-ache had 'grown. When he was in battle, he became lost in red rage and there was no sense of the ache, but when the battle lust subsided, especially when he was slow to return to Elvandar, the throbbing returned.

Footsteps sounded lightly behind, and without turning, he said. 'I wish to be alone.'

Aglaranna said, 'The pain, Tomas?'

A faint stirring of some strange feeling rose briefly within and he cocked his head as if listening for something.

Then he answered curtly, 'yes. I will return to our rooms soon. Leave now and prepare for me to join you later. Aglaranna stepped back, her proud features showing

pain at being addressed in such a tone. She turned quickly and left. As she walked through the woods, her emotions churned within. Since surrendering to Tomas's desire, and her own, she had lost the ability to command him, or to resist his commands. He was now lord over her, and she felt shame. It was a joyless union, not the return of lost happiness she had hoped for. But there was a will-sapping compulsion, a need to be with him, to belong to him, that stripped away her defences. Tomas was dynamic, powerful, and sometimes cruel. She corrected herself: not cruel just so removed from any other being, no comparison could be made. He was not indifferent to her needs: he simply was unaware she had any. As she approached elvandar, the soft fairy lights reflected in the shimmering tears that touched her cheeks.

Tomas was only partially aware of her departure.

Under the dull ache within his head, a voice faintly called to him. He strained to listen, knowing its timbre, its colour, knowing who called .



'Tomas?'

Yes .

Ashen-Shugar looked across the desolation of the plains, dry cracked lands devoid of moisture save for bubbling alkali pots that spewed foul odours into the air, Aloud, to his unseen companion, he said, 'it has been some time since we last spoke.'

'The others seek to keep us apart. You are forgotten.'

The fetid Winds blew from the north. cold but cloying  
The smell of decay was everywhere, and in the residue of the mighty madness that had gripped the universe around, only faint stirrings of life reasserting itself were felt.

'No matter. We are together again.'

What is this place.?

'The Desolation of the Chaos Wars. Draken-Korin's monument, the lifeless tundra that was once great grasslands.

Few living things abide here. Most creatures flee to the south, and more hospitable climes.'

Who are you.?

Ashen-Shugar laughed. 'I am what you are becoming  
We are one. So you have said many times.'

I had forgotten.

Ashen-Shugar called and Shuruga sped towards him over a grey landscape, while black clouds thundered overhead. The mighty dragon landed and his master climbed upon his back. Casting a glance at the spot marked by ash the only reminder of Draken-Korin's

existence, the Valheru said, "Come, let us see what fate has wrought.'

Shuruga leaped into the heavens and above the desolation they flew. Ashen-Shugar was silent as he rode upon Shuruga's broad back, feeling the wind blowing across his face. They flew and time passed them by, as they shared the death of one age and the birth of another. High in the blue sky they soared, free of the horror of the Chaos Wars.

It is worthy of sorrow.

'I think not. There is a lesson, though I cannot bring myself to know it. Yet I sense you do.' Ashen-Shugar closed his eyes as the throbbing returned.

Yes, I remember.

'Tomas?'

Tomas's eyes snapped open. He found Galain standing a short way off, near the edge of the clearing. "Shall I return later?'

Tomas rose slowly from where he had sat dreaming.

His voice was rough and tired. 'No. what is it?'

'Dolgan's dwarven band has reached the outer forest

and waits for you near the winding brook. The dwarves struck an outworld enclave as they crossed the river.' There was a merry smile upon the young elf's face'. 'They have finally captured prisoners.'

A strange look of mixed delight and fury passed over Tomas's face. Galain felt strange emotions as he regarded the reaction of the warrior in white and gold to this news. As if listening to a distant call, Tomas spoke distractedly. 'Go to the dwarven camp. I will join you there presently.'

Galain withdrew, and Tomas listened. A distant voice grew louder.

'Have I erred?'

The hall echoed with the words, for now it was vacant, the servants having slipped away. Ashen-Shugar brooded upon his throne. He spoke to shadows. 'Have I erred?' Now you know doubt, answered the ever present voice.

'This strange quietness within, what is it?'

It is death approaching.

Ashen-Shugar closed his eyes. 'I thought as much. So few of my kind live beyond battle. It was a rare thing. I am the last. Still, I would like to fly Shuruga once more.'

He is gone. dead, ages past.

'But I flew him this morning.'

It was a dream. As is this.

'Am I then also mad?'

You are but a memory. This is but a dream

'Then I will do what is planned. I accept the inevitable.

Another will come to take my place.'

So it has happened already, for I am the one who came, and I have taken up your sword and put on your mantle,' your cause is now mine. I guard against those who would plunder this world.

'Then am I content to die.'

Opening his eyes, he took one last look at his hall now cloaked in ancient dust. Closing them for the last time, the Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches cast his final spell. His waning powers, still unmatched upon this world by any save the new gods, flowed from his tired body, infusing his armour. Smoky wisps wafted upward from where his body had rested, and soon only the golden armour, white tabard, shield, and sword of white and gold remained.

I am Ashen-Shugar, I am Tomas.

Tomas's eyes opened and for a moment he was confused to find himself in the glade. A strange passion grew within as he felt a new strength flowing throughout his being. In his mind rang a clarion call: I am Ashen-Shugar, the Valheru. I will destroy all who seek to

plunder my world.

With a terrible resolve he left the glade, to find the place the dwarves had brought his enemies~

'it is good to see you again, friend Longbow,' said Dolgan, puffing away on his pipe. They had not seen each other since a chance meeting several years before when the dwarves passed through the forest east of Crydee on their way to Elvandar.

Martin Calin and a few elves had come to see the dwarves' prisoners, who were still bound. They waited in a group in a corner of the clearing, glaring at their captors. Galain entered the clearing and said, 'Tomas is coming soon.'

Martin said, 'How is it, Dolgan, after all these years, you managed to capture prisoners, and an entire enclave at that?'

Behind the eight bound warriors stood a fearful group of Tsurani slaves, unbound but huddled together, uncertain of their fate. Dolgan gave an offhanded wave.

'Usually we're raiding across the river, and prisoners tend to slow things down during a withdrawal, being either unconscious or uncooperative. This ' time we had little choice in the matter, as we needed to cross the river Crydee. In past years we'd wait to sneak across in darkness, but this year they're as close as nettles in a thicket everywhere along the river.

'We found this band in a relatively isolated spot, with only these eight to guard the slaves. They were repairing an earthwork, one which I judge was overrun a short while ago during an elver sortie. We slipped around them, then a few of the lads climbed into the trees - though they liked it little. We dropped down upon the three outer guards, silencing them before they could shout the alert. The other five were napping, the lazy louts. We slipped into camp, and after a few well-placed strokes with our hammers, we bound them. These others' - he indicated the slaves - 'were too timid to make a sound. When it was clear we had not alarmed the nearby enclaves, we thought to bring them along. Seemed a waste to leave them behind. Thought we might learn something useful.'

Dolgan tried to keep an impassive expression, but pride over his company's work shone through like a beacon in the night.

Martin smiled his approval, and said to Calin, 'I hope we may learn what is coming, if the feared offensive is really to be mounted and where. I've learned a few phrases of their tongue, but not enough to make any sense of what they might tell us. Only Father Tully and Charles, my Tsurani tracker, can speak to them fluently. Perhaps we should attempt to move them to Crydee!'

Calin said. 'We have the means to learn their tongue, given time. I doubt they would lend much cooperation in their transport. Most likely they would try to raise the alarm every step of the way.'

Martin 'conceded the point. Then a disturbance caused him to turn.

Tomas came striding into the clearing. Dolgan began to greet him, but something in the young warrior's manner and expression silenced him. There was madness in Tomas's eyes, something the dwarf had glimpsed before as a glimmer, but which now shone forth brightly.

Tomas regarded the bound prisoners, then pulled his sword slowly and pointed at them. The words he spoke were alien to both Martin and the dwarves, but the elves were rocked by what they heard. Several of the older elves dropped to their knees in supplication and the younger ones drew away in reflexive fear. Only Calin stood his ground, though he appeared shaken. Then slowly the Elf Prince turned to Martin, his face drained of colour. In terrified tones he said, "At last the Valheru is truly among US.'

Ignoring all others in the clearing, Tomas walked up to the first Tsurani prisoner. The bound soldier looked up with a mixture of fear and defiance. Suddenly the golden sword was raised high and arced down, severing the man's head from his shoulders. Blood splattered the white tabard, then flowed off, leaving it spotless. A low moan of fear came from the huddled slaves, and the remaining soldiers' eyes were wide in terror. Slowly Tomas turned to face the next prisoner, and again his sword took a life. Martin freed himself from shocked paralysis~ forcing his eyes away from the butchery. He felt terrible dread, but it appeared as nothing to what the elves' revealed in their abasement before Tomas. Calin's face showed a struggle within as he tried to overcome a nearly instinctive obedience to the words spoken in the ancient language of the Valheru, masters of all, ages past. The younger elves, less studied in the old wisdom, simply had no understanding of the overwhelming need to obey this man in white and gold. The language of the Valheru was still the language of power.

Tomas turned away from his slaughter and Martin felt struck by the strength of his gaze. Gone was any vestige of the boy from Crydee. Now an alien presence suffused this being. Tomas's arm drew back, and Martin tensed to dodge the blow. Any human was a potential victim, and even the dwarves drew back at the awesome menace Tomas projected. Then a faint spark of recognition entered

Tomas's eyes and he said, in a distant voice, 'Martin, by the love I once bore you, be gone or your life is forfeit.'

Mustering courage against the most consuming fear he had ever felt, Martin shouted, 'I'll not stand and watch you slaughter helpless men!'

Again a distant voice answered, steeped in ancient majesty and lost grandeur regained. 'These come into my world, Martin. None may seek that which is my domain, my preserve, mine alone! Shall you, too, come into my world, Martin?' With a nearly unseen quickness, Tomas wheeled and two Tsurani died.

Martin charged, crossing the gap between in a bound, and knocked Tomas away from the prisoners. They went down in a heap, and Martin grabbed at the wrist that held the golden sword.

A strong man capable of carrying a freshly killed buck for miles, Martin was no match for Tomas. As easily as picking up a bothersome infant Tomas pushed Martin aside and came lightly to his feet.

Martin sprang at Tomas

again, but this time Tomas stood ready. He simply seized Martin by the tunic and said, 'None may interfere with my will.' He tossed Martin across the clearing as if he weighed less than a tenth his weight. Martin's arms flailed the air as he arced high over the ground, striving to control his fall. He landed hard, and all around could hear the breath explode from his lungs as he struck.

Dolgan rushed to his side, for the elves were still held in thrall by what they had witnessed. The dwarven chief poured water from a skin at his side upon Martin's face and shook him awake. The strangled cries of terror from the Tsurani slaves watching soldiers being butchered greeted Martin as he regained his wits.

Martin struggled to focus his vision, the scene before him swimming and shifting. When he could see, he drew a hissing breath in horror.

Tomas struck down the last Tsurani soldier and began to advance upon the cringing slaves. They appeared unable to move, watching with wide eyes the bringer of their destruction, looking like nothing so much to Martin than a band of deer startled by a sudden light in the night.

A ragged cry came from Martin's lips as Tomas killed the first Tsurani slave, a pitiful-looking willow of a man. Longbow struggled to rise, senses reeling, and Dolgan helped him to his feet.

Tomas raised his sword and another died. Again the golden blade was raised and he looked into the face of his victim. Eyes round with fear, a young boy, no more than twelve years old, stood waiting for the blow that would end his life.

Suddenly time expanded for Tomas, the moment frozen

in his mind. He studied the shock of dark hair and the large brown eyes of the boy. The child crouched, awaiting the death he saw over him, his head shaking no, as his lips formed a single phrase over and over.

In the faint light of the clearing, Tomas saw an old ghost, the spectre of a friend long forgotten. A remembered bond, from his earliest memories as a child, reassociated itself with his consciousness. Images blurred, past and present confused, and he said, "pug?"

Within his mind, pain exploded and another will sought to overwhelm him.

Pug. it shrieked.

Kill him. came a raging answer, and within him two wills battled.

No. screamed the other.

To all in the glade, Tomas stood frozen, shaking with some inner struggle, his sword still held high, waiting for release.

These are the enemy. kill them.

He is a boy. Only a boy.

He is the enemy.

A boy.

Tomas's face became a mask of pain his teeth clenched and every muscle drew taut, stretching skin tightly over skull. His eyes grew round and perspiration began to flow from under his helm, down his brows and cheeks.

Martin stumbled to his feet. He moved slowly, every gesture bringing pain from the battering he had taken.

Tomas's hand slowly moved downward, each inch a shaking, trembling passage as he warred within. The boy was transfixed, unable to move, his eyes following the movement of the blade.

I am Ashen-Shugar. I am Valheru.) sang a voice within in a torrent of anger, battle madness, and bloodlust.

Against this sea of rage stood a single rock, a calm small voice within that said, simply, I am Tommas.

Again and again the sea of hate crashed over the rock of calm, each time engulfing it, then sliding back, to come again. But each time the tide diminished and the rock stood clear, rising above the mad surf. A shattering of something, the thundering of ages lost and passing, rocked Tomas's mind. He reeled, then swam within an alien landscape, seeking a pinpoint of light he knew was his way to freedom. Tides swept him along, and he battled, struggling to keep his head above the strangling black sea. A shrieking, evil wind blew overhead, and to his ears it sang a song of woeful metre. He struck out, and again he saw a pinpoint of light. Again the tide engulfed him, forcing him away from his goal, but this time it was weaker. Once more he struggled toward the light. Then came a surge, a last, terrifying assault culminating in a

total attack upon him. I am Ashen-Shugar! There came a breaking of the will, something snapping like the dead branch of a tree under the weight of newly fallen snow, like the sound of old winter ice breaking at spring's touch, as if the last assault took too great a toll.

The black sea lost its fury and subsided, and he was again standing upon high ground, a single rock. I am Tomas. In the distance the pinpoint of light began to expand before his eyes, racing forward to engulf him. I am Tomas .

'Tomas!'

He blinked, and saw he was again in the glade. Before him crouched the boy, waiting to die. He turned his head and saw Martin, sighting along a cloth-yard arrow, drawn hard against his cheek. The Huntmaster of Crydee said, 'Put down your sword, or by the gods, I'll kill you where you stand.'

Tomas's gaze wandered about the glade, and he saw the dwarves with weapons drawn, as had some of the older elves. Calin, still shaking, had his sword out and was slowly advancing upon him.

Martin watched Tomas closely, not fearing him, but respectful of his awesome strength and speed. He waited, and saw the flicker of madness still in Tomas's eyes, then, as if a veil were lifted, saw them clear. Abruptly the golden sword fell from his hand and the pale, nearly colourless eyes filled with tears. Tomas dropped to his knees. A moan of terrible anguish was torn from his lips, and Tomas cried out, 'Oh, Martin, what have I become?' Martin lowered his bow, watching as Tomas gathered

his arms about himself. Into the glade came Tathar and the other Spellweavers. They approached Tomas and then surveyed the others in the glade. So terrible were Tomas's sobs of anguish, so filled with sorrow and remorse, that many of the elves discovered they also wept.

Tathar said to Martin Longbow, 'We felt the fabric of our spells torn asunder a short while ago, and came at once. We feared the Valheru had come, rightly it seems.'

Martin said, 'Now?'

'The other side of the balance. That the Valheru is at last displaced by the boy there can be no doubt, but the boy now must feel the weight of ages of slaughter, and the guilt over joy felt when taking other lives. The burdens felt by mortals are again his, and we shall now see if he can withstand them. This agony may prove his end.'

Martin left the ancient elf and crossed to Tomas. In the dim light he was the first to perceive the change. Gone were the alien cast to his features, the gleaming eyes, the haughty brow. Again he was Tomas, a man, though there were still legacies of his experiences that would forever

proclaim him something more than a man: the elver ears, the pale eyes. Gone was the Lord of Power, the Old One, the Valheru. Where before a Dragon Lord had stood, now crouched a troubled, sick man in torment over what he had done.

Tomas raised his head as Martin touched him upon the shoulder. Red-rimmed eyes, nearly mad from grief, regarded Martin for a brief moment, then closed as if seeking oblivion to all around. For some time the elves and dwarves watched, and the Tsurani slaves were silent, aware that some miracle had occurred, not understanding, but suddenly sure they were spared. For some time they watched, as Martin Longbow cradled the sobbing man in white and gold, who cried in anguish so terrible to hear.

Aglaranna sat upon her sleeping pallet, brushing her long red-gold hair. As before, she waited for Tomas, half hoping, half fearing he would come.

A shout from without caused her to rise. She gathered her robes around her and left her quarters. Standing upon a platform, she watched as a group of elves and dwarves came towards Elvandar's heart. With them came Martin Longbow and some humans, clearly outworlders from their dress.

Her hands went to her mouth as she gasped. In the centre of the group walked Tomas, at his side a young boy with eyes wide at the splendour of Elvandar.

Aglaranna was unable to move, fearful that what she witnessed was the product of delusion born of hope. Time sped past as she waited, then Tomas stood before her. Leaving the boy, he stepped forward. Martin took the boy by the hand and led him away, the others following, giving the Elf Queen and Tomas the solitude they needed.

Tomas reached out slowly and touched her face, and he drank in the sight of her, as if seeing her as he had when she had first appeared at Crydee. Then, without words, he slowly, gently enfolded her in his arms. He held her in silence, letting her feel the warmth of the love that filled him at sight of her.

After a time he whispered in her ear, 'For each moment of sorrow I have visited upon you, O my lady, I pray the gods grant me a year to gift you with joy. I am again your adoring subject.'

Too filled with happiness to speak, the Elf Queen simply clung to him, her sorrow only a dim memory.



The troops stood quietly.

Long columns of men awaited their turn at passing through the rift into Midkemia. Officers walked by, their presence ensuring discipline in the lines. Laurie, in the mask and robe of a Red Priest, was impressed at the level of control these officers had over their men. He judged the Tsurani code of honour, where orders were followed without question, a very alien thing.

He and Kasumi moved quickly down the line, heading for the first detachment behind the one now entering the rift. Laurie bent his knees and stooped, to detract from his noticeable height. As they had hoped, more soldiers than not looked away as the bogus Red Priest passed.

When they reached the head of the column, Kasumi fell in. His younger brother, who had been promoted to Strike Leader for this offensive, seemed to pay no attention to his commander's late arrival, or to the priest of Turakamu who arrived with him.

After a seemingly interminable delay, the command came and they stepped forward into the shimmering glow of 'nothingness' that marked the rift between the two worlds. There was a brief flash of lights, a momentary dizziness, and they found themselves walking forward into a light Midkemean rain. Sheets of wetness, little more than a heavy mist, fell around them. The Tsurani soldiers, hotweather-bred, wrapped cloaks about themselves.

A staging officer briefly conferred with Kasumi, and the troops were ordered to move off to the northeast a specified distance and erect a camp. Kasumi and Hokanu were then to report to the Warlord's tent for briefings.

The Warlord himself was back in Kentosani, the Holy City, preparing for the Imperial Games, but his subcommander was to instruct them in their duties and areas of responsibility until his return.

They quickly moved up towards the front and set up camp. Once the commander's tent was up, Laurie and the Shinzawai brothers ducked inside. While bundles containing

Midkemean clothing and weapons were unpacked, Kasumi said, 'As soon as we return from our meeting with the subcommander, we will eat. Tonight we will lead a patrol of our area, and try to slip through the lines.'

Kasumi looked at his brother. "After we have gone, brother, it will be your responsibility to hide our departure for as long as possible. Once there has been fighting reported, you may claim we have been lost to the enemy.' Hokanu agreed. 'We had best report now.'

Kasumi looked at Laurie. 'Stay inside. We want no risk. You are the tallest damned priest I have ever seen.'

Laurie nodded. He sat upon some cushions, and waited

The patrol moved silently through the trees. The rain had stopped, but the weather had turned colder, and Laurie suppressed a shiver. Years in the hot climes of Kelewan had driven away his former ability to ignore the chill. He wondered about the new troops from Tsuranuanni and how they would react when the first snowfalls came. Most likely with studied indifference, regardless of what they felt inside. A Tsurani soldier would never let himself appear upset by something as trivial as solid water falling from the sky. They elected the North Pass, for it led to the largest front

and they were less likely to be noticed passing through the lines. They reached the head of the pass and a station guard passed them along. Once outside the valley they struck slightly more eastwards than their patrol called for. Beyond the rolling hills and light woods was the road from LaMut to Zun. Once the two travellers had left their patrol and reached it, they would head for Zun, buy horses, and ride south. With luck they would reach Krondor in two weeks. There they would change mounts and head for Salador, where they would find passage on a ship for Rillanon.

They moved at a dogtrot that ate up miles. Laurie ran beside Kasumi, marvelling at the soldiers' stamina. They might not be showing fatigue, but he was feeling it. Hokanu signalled for the patrol to stop at the head of a large, flat area near the woods. "Here we will start our swing back to our patrol area. We should not see any Tsurani soldiers from here. Let us hope, for your sake, we don't meet with Kingdom troops either."

He gave a signal, and they moved out. Laurie and Kasumi were handed backpacks and clothing. They quickly changed, then followed the route taken by the patrol. They would follow for a short distance, using the patrol, for cover should any Kingdom troops be nearby.

They moved into a small vale, and found the patrol held up by something ahead. The last man in line motioned them for quiet. They moved to the head of the line and Laurie looked around for a quick exit route should there be any trouble. Hokanu said softly, "I thought I heard something, but there has been no sound for several minutes."

Kasumi nodded. "Then move forward. We will wait until you have crossed the open area ahead, then follow." He indicated a broad, flat area between the mouth of the vale where they stood, and a stand of trees at the opposite end.

When the patrol had reached the centre of the open area, the clouds parted and shafts of moonlight lit up the area. "Damn!" Kasumi swore under his breath. "They might as well light torches now."

Suddenly the trees erupted with motion and sound. The ground trembled as riders came charging forward, out from the trees that hid them. Each wore heavy chain mail and a full helm. Long lances were levelled at the surprised Tsurani soldiers.

The Tsurani had barely enough time to ready a rude line for defence before the riders were upon them. Cries of horses and men filled the air and the Tsurani fell before the charge. The riders rode over the Tsurani and reformed at the end of the vale where the two fugitives hid.

They wheeled about and charged again. The Tsurani survivors of the last charge, less than half the men, moved quickly up the west side of the vale, where the trees and incline of the hillside would counter the horsemen's ability to charge.

Laurie touched Kasumi's arm and motioned to the right. It was evident the Tsurani officer was barely holding himself in check from joining his men. Suddenly Kasumi was off, hugging the edge of the trees as he ran low. Laurie followed and spotted what appeared to be a rough path heading eastward. He grabbed Kasumi's sleeve and pointed. They turned their backs to the fighting and moved off.

The next day found two travellers moving down the road to ZUn. Both wore woollen shirts, trousers, and cloaks. Closer examination by a trained eye would have revealed that the material was not really wool, but something like it. Their belts and boots were made from needra hide dyed to resemble leather. The fashion was Midkemian, as were the swords they wore on their belts.

One was obviously a minstrel, for he wore a lute slung over his backpack. The other looked to be a freebooter mercenary. Any casual observer would have been unlikely to guess their origins, or the riches carried in those backpacks, for each had a small fortune in gems tucked away in the bottom of his pack.

A northbound troop of light cavalry passed them on the road, and Laurie said, "Things have changed since I was last here. Those men in the forest were Royal Krondorian Lancers, and those who just passed wore the colors of Quester's View. All the forces of the Armies of the West must be marshaling here. Something seems to be in the air. Perhaps they have somehow gleaned your Warlord's plan for a major offensive?"

"I don't know. Whatever is happening does not seem to indicate that things are as stable as we have been led to

believe back home. The concentration of troops here makes me think the Warlord's victory may not be easily won.' Kasumi was quiet for a moment as they walked along the road. 'I hope that Hokanu was among (those who reached the trees.' It was the first time he had mentioned his brother, and Laurie could think of nothing to say.

Two days later, Laurie, a minstrel late of Tyr-sog, and

Kenneth, a mercenary from the Vale of Dreams, sat in the Green Cat Inn in the city of Zun. Both ate with hearty appetite, for they had lived on soldiers' rations - dried cakes of grain and fruit - for two days.

Laurie had spent over an hour negotiating with a less than reputable gem broker for several smaller stones value

He had settled for one third their actual worth, stating, "if he thinks they are stolen, he will not be too quick to ask questions.'

Kasumi asked, "Why didn't you sell him all the stones?' 'Your father has given us enough to retire on for the rest of our days. I doubt if all the brokers in Zun could raise the gold to pay for them. We will sell a few as we travel, besides, they weigh less than gold.'

Finishing their meal, the two men paid and left. Kasumi could only just refrain from staring at all the metal he could see everywhere, a lifetime's riches on Kelewan. Just the cost of the meal in silver could support a Tsurani family for a year.

They hurried along one of the city's business streets, heading to the south gate. Near there, they had been informed, a reputable trader in horses would sell them mounts and tack for a fair price. They found the man, a thin, hawk-beaked fellow by the name of Brim. Laurie spent the better part of an hour haggling with the horse trader for two of his better mounts. They left him expressing concern over their ability to sleep nights after cheating an honest businessman out of the money he needed to feed his starving children.

As they rode through the gate that put them on the road to Ylith, Kasumi said, "Much of this land of yours seems odd, but as you haggled with that merchant, I was reminded of home. Our traders are much more polite and would never think of raising their voices in such a manner, but it is still the same thing. They all have starving children.'

Laurie laughed and spurred his mount forward. Soon they were out of sight of the city.

South of quEsTER's View they passed more troops on the road, this time Kingdom regulars and auxiliaries trudging along on foot while their officers rode. Laurie and Kasumi had stopped to untack and graze their horses while the column moved past. The fighter watched the soldiers passing with an expert's eye. Red-uniformed soldiers marched in tight formation, while the more ragged auxiliaries still managed a look of organization. The baggage train moved in good order, experienced cart

drivers keeping the animals in proper intervals. When they passed, Kasumi said, "Those soldiers are better than any I've seen so far on your world, Laurie. Those in red look like professionals. They march well. And those others seem experienced, despite their motley look."

Laurie nodded. "I recognize the standard. That's the garrison of Shamata, in the Vale of Dreams. They have had their fair share of fighting Kesh's dog-soldiers and are a veteran outfit. Those others are auxiliaries, Valemern mercenaries; a less tender band of lads you'd be hard pressed to find." Laurie started to resaddle his horse. "They're as seasoned a force of men as your countrymen will have faced, in truth."

When the horses were tacked up, Laurie and Kasumi remounted and rode on. Soon they could see the Bitter Sea, as the road rounded the hills of Quester's view.

Laurie pulled up his horse and stared out to sea. "What is it?" asked Kasumi.

Laurie shaded his eyes. "Ships! A whole fleet of them sailing north." He sat for a moment watching, and at last Kasumi could see dots of white upon the blue of the sea.

"Where are they bound?" Kasumi asked.

"Ylith'

"Ylith is the only major point north of here. They must be carrying supplies for the war."

They resumed their ride. A sense of urgency descended upon them both, as everything they saw pointed to an intensification of the war, and the longer they tarried, the less likely the success of their mission.

FOURTEEN DAYS LATER, they reached the northern gate of Krondor. As they rode through, they were regarded suspiciously by several guards dressed in black and gold. Once beyond earshot of the gate guards, Laurie said, "Those are not the Prince's tabards. The banner of Bas-Tyra flies over Krondor."

They rode slowly for a minute, then Kasumi said, "What does it mean?"

"I don't know. But I think I know a place we can find out." They rode through a series of streets bounded on each side by warehouses and commercial enterprises. Sounds from the docks, several streets away, could be heard. Otherwise the district was quiet. "Strange," remarked Laurie, as they rode on. "This part of the city is usually busiest at this time of day."

Kasumi looked around, not sure of what he expected to see.

Midkemian cities, compared to those of the Empire, seemed small and dirty. Still, there was something strange about the lack of activity here.

Both Zun and Ylith had been teeming with soldiers, traders, and citizens at midday, even though they were smaller cities than Krondor. As they rode, a feeling of disquiet visited Kasumi.

They entered a section of the city~ even more run-down than the warehouse district. Here the streets were narrow, with four- and five-story buildings hugging closely to either side. Dark shadows abounded, even at noon. Those in the street, a few traders and women going to market, moved quietly and with speed. Everywhere the riders looked,

they could see expressions of caution and distrust.

Laurie led Kasumi to a gate, behind which the upper part of a threestory building could be seen. Laurie leaned over in the saddle and pulled on a bell rope. When there was no answer after a few minutes, he pulled again.

A moment later a peek window in the door slid aside, two eyes could be seen, and a voice said, "What's your business?"

Laurie's tone was sharp. "Lucas, is that you? What is happening when travelers can't gain entrance?"

The eyes widened, and the peek window slid shut. The gate swung open with a creaking protest, and a man stepped out to push it wide.

"Laurie, you scoundrel!" he said as he admitted the riders. "It's been five-no, six years."

They rode in, and Laurie was shocked by the condition of the inn.

Off to one side was a dilapidated stable. Opposite the gate a sign hung over the main entrance, depicting in faded hues a parrot of many colors with wings spread. They could hear the gate close behind them.

The man called Lucas, tall and gaunt, with grey hair, said, "You'll have to stable the animals yourself. I am alone here and must return to the common room before my guests steal everything there. I'll see you and your friend inside and we can talk." He turned away, and the two riders were left to tend to their mounts.

As they removed the saddles from the horses, Laurie said, "There is a lot happening here that I don't understand. The Rainbow Parrot was never a showplace, but it was always one of the better taverns in the Poor quarter." He quietly rubbed down his animal. "If there is any place we can find out what is truly going on in Krondor, this is it. And one thing I have learned over my years of traveling through the Kingdom is when gate guards are watching travelers closely, it is time to stay somewhere they are not likely to visit. You can get your throat cut quickly in the Poor Quarter, but you'll rarely see a guardsman about. And if they do come, the man who was trying to cut your throat will more than likely hide you until they are gone."

"And then try to cut your throat."

Laurie laughed. "You learn quickly."

When the horses were cared for, the two travelers carried their saddles and packs into the inn. Inside they were greeted by the sight of a dimly lit common room, with a long bar along the rear wall. On the left stood a large fireplace, and on the right a stairway leading upwards.

There were a number of empty tables in the room, and two with customers.

The newcomers were given a quick look by the guests, who then returned to their drinks and quiet conversation.

Laurie and Kasumi crossed over to the bar, where Lucas stood cleaning some wine cups with a less than clean rag. They dropped their packs at their feet, and Laurie said, "Any Keshian wine?"

Lucas said, "A little, but it is expensive. There has been little trade with Kesh since the trouble started."

Laurie looked at Lucas, as if weighing the cost. "Then two ales."

Lucas drew two large tankards of ale and said, "It is good to see you, Laurie. I've missed that tender voice of yours."

Laurie said, "That's not what you said the last time. As I recall, you likened it to the screeching of a cat looking for a fight."

They chuckled over that, and Lucas said, "With things so bleak, I have mellowed toward those who were true friends. There are few of us left." He threw a pointed look at Kasumi.

Laurie said, "This is Kenneth, a true friend of mine, Lucas."

Lucas continued to regard the Tsurani for a moment, then smiled.

"Laurie's recommendation counts heavily. Welcome." He extended his hand, and Kasumi shook with him, Kingdom fashion.

"I am pleased at your welcome."

Lucas frowned at the sound of his accent. "An outlander?"

"From the Vale of Dreams," said Kasumi.

"The Kingdom side," added Laurie.

Lucas studied the fighter. After a moment he shrugged. "Whatever; It matters not a whit to me, but be wary. These are suspicious times, and there is little love wasted on strangers. Take care who you speak with, for there are rumors that Kesh's dog-soldiers are ready to move north again, and you are not far from being Keshian."

Before Kasumi could say anything, Laurie said, "Is there to be trouble with Kesh, then?"

Lucas shook his head. "I can't say. The market has more rumors than a beggar has boils." His voice lowered. "Two weeks back, traders arrived with word the Empire of Great Kesh was again fighting far to the south; seeking to subdue their former vassals in the Gonfederacy once more." So things should stay quiet for a while. They learned the folly of a two-front war over a hundred years back when they managed to lose all of Bosnia and still not beat the Confederacy.'

Laurie said, "We have been traveling for a very long time and heard little news. Why is Bas-Tyra's banner over Krondor?"

Lucas quickly looked around the room. The drinkers seemed oblivious to the conversation at the bar, but Lucas motioned for silence.'

"I will show you a room," he said loudly. Both Laurie and Kasumi were a little surprised, but picked up their belongings and followed Lucas upstairs without comment.

He led them to a small room, with two beds and a nightstand. When the door was closed behind, he said, "I trust you, Laurie, so I'll ask no questions, but know things have changed greatly since last you were here. Even in the Poor Quarter there are ears that belong to the Viceroy. . Bas-Tyra has the city under his boot-heel, and it is a foolish man who speaks without seeing who is listening."

Lucas sat down on one of the beds, and Laurie and Kasumi sat across from him. Lucas continued, "When Bas-Tyra came to Krondor he carried the King's warrant naming him ruler of Krondor, with full viceregal powers. Prince Erland and his family were locked up in the palace, though Guy calls it 'protective custody.' Then Guy came down hard on the city. Press-gangs roamed the waterfront, and many a man now sails in Lord Jessup's fleet without his wife or children knowing what became of their old pa. Since then, any who speak against the Viceroy or King simply vanish, 'cause Guy's got a secret police listening at every door in the city.

"Taxes increase each year to pay for the war, and trade's drying up,

except for those selling to the army for the war, and they're getting paid in worthless vouchers. These are hard times, and the Viceroy's doing nothing to make them easier. Food is scarce, and there is little money to pay for what there is. Many farmers have lost their farms for taxes, and now the land lies fallow for want of someone to till it. So the farmers wander into the city, swelling the population. Most of the young men have been drafted into the army or the fleet. Be careful you aren't picked up by the guards, for whatever reason, and be wary of the pressgangs.

"Still," Lucas said with a chuckle, "things got lively around here for a time when Prince Arutha came to Krondor."

"Borric's son? He's in the city?" asked Laurie.

A twinkle of pleasure showed in Lucas's eyes. "No longer." He chuckled again. "Last winter, as bold as bright brass, the Prince comes sailing into Krondor. He must have taken the Straits of Darkness during the winter, or he never would have reached the city when he did." He quickly told them of Arutha and Anita's escape.

Laurie said, "Did they return to Crydee?"

Lucas nodded. "A trader in from Carse a week ago was full of news of this and that. One thing he heard was some Tsurani were acting up around Jonril, and the Prince of Crydee was ready to come down to help if needed. So Arutha must have made it back."

Laurie said, "Guy must have been fit to burst at the news."

Lucas's smile vanished. "Well, he was, Laurie. He'd tossed Prince Erland into the dungeon to get his permission to marry Anita. He kept him there after he heard of Anita's escape. I guess he thought the girl would come back rather than let her father stay in a damp cell, but he was wrong. Now the word's on the street the Prince is near death from the chill. That's why the city's in such a state. No one knows what will happen if Erland dies. He's well liked, and there might be trouble."

Laurie looked at Lucas with an unspoken question. "Nothing like rebellion,"

Lucas answered. "We're too dispirited. But a few of Guy's guards may turn up missing at muster, and there'll be many inconveniences getting supplies to the garrison and palace and the like. And I wouldn't wish to be the Viceroy's taxman when he's next sent into the Poor quarter."

Laurie considered what he had heard. "We are headed east. What about conditions on the road?" Lucas

slowly shook his head. "There is still some traveling done.

Once past Darkmoor, you should have scant trouble, I'm thinking. We hear that things in the East are more as they used to be. Still, I'd move carefully."

Kasumi asked, "Will we be troubled leaving the city?"

"The north gate is still the best way. It is undermanned, as usual. For a small fee, the Mockers can see you safely through."

"Mockers?" asked the fighter.

Lucas raised his brows in surprise. "You are from a long way off. The Guild of Thieves. They remain in control of the Poor quarter, and the Upright Man still has influence with the merchants and traders, especially along the docks. The warehouse district is their second home,



after the Poor Quarter. They can get you out, if you have any trouble at the gate."

Laurie said, "We will keep that in mind, Lucas. What of your family? I have not seen them around."

Lucas seemed to shrink into himself, "My wife is dead, Laurie, of the fever, a year ago. My sons are both in the army. I have heard little of them in a year. Last time I received a message, they were in the north with Lords Borric and Brucal.

"The city is full of veterans of the war. You can see them everywhere. They are the ones with missing limbs, or blind eyes. But they always wear their old tabards. And a pathetic sight they are, too." He got a faraway look in his eyes. "I just hope my boys don't end up like that."

Laurie and Kasumi said nothing. Lucas came out of his reverie. "I must return downstairs. Supper will be ready in four hours, though nothing like I used to serve." As the innkeeper turned to go, he said, "If you need to contact the Mockers, let me know."

After he had left, Kasumi said, "It is a hard thing to know your country, Laurie, and still look upon the war as glorious."

Laurie nodded.

THE WAREHOUSE was dark and musty. Except for Laurie and Kasumi and two fresh horses, it was empty. They had stayed at the Rainbow Parrot the night before and had purchased new mounts at great expense, then had tried to leave the city. When they had reached the city gates, they had been stopped by a detachment of Bas-Tyra's guards. When it was obvious that the guards were not likely to let them leave without trouble, Laurie and Kasumi had broken away from them, and a mad dash through the city had followed. They had lost their pursuers in the Poor Quarter and had returned to the Rainbow Parrot. Lucas had sent word to the Upright Man, and now they waited for a thief to guide them out of the city.

A whistle broke the silence, and Laurie and Kasumi had their swords in hand in an instant. A high-pitched chuckle greeted them, and a small figure dropped from above. In the dark it was difficult to see where the figure sprang from, but Laurie suspected their visitor had been hiding in the rafters for some time.

The figure stepped forward, and in the dim light they could see it was a boy, no older than thirteen. "There's a party at Mother's," the newcomer said.

"And a good time will be had by all," Laurie answered.

"You're the travelers, then."

"You're the guide?" asked Kasumi, taking no effort to hide the surprise in his voice.

The boy's voice was filled with bravado. "Aye. Jimmy the Hand is your guide. And a better one in all Krondor you'll not find."

Laurie said, "What's to be done?"

"First there's the matter of payment. It's a hundred sovereigns each."

Without comment Laurie dug out several small gems and handed them over. "Will these do?"

The boy turned to the warehouse door and cracked it slightly, admitting

a shaft of moonlight. He inspected the gems with an expert's eye and returned to stand before the two fugitives. "These'll do. For another hundred, you can have this." He offered a piece of parchment. Laurie took it, but couldn't make out what was written on it in the dim light. "What is it?"

Jimmy chuckled. "A royal warrant, allowing the bearer to travel the King's Highway."

"Is it genuine?" asked the minstrel.

"My word. I nicked it myself from a trader from Ludland this morning. It's valid for another month."

"Done," said Laurie, and the minstrel gave the boy another gem.

When the gems were safely in the thief's pouch, he said, "Soon we'll be hearing a brouhaha at the gate. A few of the boys will put on some mummery for the guards. When everything's up in the wind, we'll slip through."

He returned to the door and looked out without further comment.

While they waited, Kasumi whispered, "Can he be trusted?"

"No, but we have no choice. If the Upright Man could show a larger profit by turning us in, he might. But the Mockers have little love for the guards, and now less than usual, according to Lucas, so it is unlikely-. Still, keep your wits about you."

Time stretched on interminably, then suddenly shouts could be heard. Jimmy signaled with a sharp whistle, which was answered by another from outside. "It's time," he said, and was out the door.

Laurie and Kasumi led their horses out after him. "Follow closely and quickly," their small guide said as he set off.

They rounded the corner of a building and could see the north gate.

A group of men were involved in a brawl, many appearing to be sailors from the docks. The guards were doing their best to restore order, but each time one pushed a combatant away from the fray, another would appear from the shadows around the gate and join in. In a few minutes every guard was involved in breaking up the fight, and Jimmy said, "Now!"

He broke from the building, with the travelers close behind, dashed to the wall next to the gatehouse. They edged their way along in the shadows, the horses' clatter covered by the noise of the brawl.

When they were near the gate, a single guard could be seen, on the other side, whom they hadn't been able to see from his location.

Laurie gripped Jimmy's shoulder. "We'll have to take him."

Jimmy said, "No. If weapons are drawn, the guards will leave that little bit of fun like a burning warehouse. Leave him to me."

Jimmy sprang forward and ran to the guard. As the guard brought his spear forward across his chest and shouted, "Halt!" Jimmy kicked him hard in the leg, above the boot. The man let out a howl, then looked at his small assailant with fury on his face. "Why you little-" Jimmy stuck out his tongue and started to run toward the docks. The guard set out in hot pursuit, and the two travelers slipped through the gate. Once outside the city, they mounted quickly and rode off. As they rode away from Krondor, they could hear the sounds of the brawl.

THEY REStED a day at Darkmoor, in an inn in the town below the castle. They had been two days in the hills and needed to rest their mounts before journeying over the grasslands to Malac's Cross. The town was quiet, and little of interest occurred until the inn door opened and a man in dirty brown robes entered. The man was old and bent with years, and thin to the point of gauntness. The innkeeper looked up from cleaning ale cups and said, "What do you wish?" Softly the old man said, "Please, sir, a little food."

"Can you pay?"

"I can fashion spells to rid your inn of vermin, should you be plagued by rats, sir. Perhaps-

"Begone! I have no food for beggars or magicians. Get out! And if I find my milk clabbered, I'll set my dogs upon you!"

The magician looked around. Laurie reached across the table and touched Kasumi upon the arm. His Tsurani heritage was betraying him, as he was showing open astonishment at what he saw. Before him stood a magician, being treated as shabbily as his clothes. Laurie's touch caused him to regain his composure. The magician slowly turned and left the inn.

Laurie sprang up and crossed to the innkeeper. Slapping some coins on the table, he said, "Quick. A joint of cold meat, a loaf of bread, and a skin of wine."

The innkeeper looked surprised, but the coins on the bar convinced him to do as ordered. When the items ordered were upon the bar, Laurie scooped them up. He paused a moment to grab a wedge of cheese off a platter and rushed out the door. Kasumi was as amazed as the innkeeper appeared to be.

Laurie looked down the road and saw the old man, his posture erect as he moved along with a staff in one hand, using it as a walking stick. He ran after the man and, when he had overtaken him, said, "Excuse me, but I was in the tavern a moment ago, and . . ." He held out the food and wineskin.

He saw pride diminish in the old man's eyes. "Why are you doing this, minstrel?"

Laurie said, "I have a friend who is a magician, a special friend. He did me a great kindness once, and . . . it's something of a repayment."

The magician accepted this explanation and took the food. While he struggled with the burden, Laurie slipped a pair of gems into the magician's empty belt pouch. There would be enough there to insure the magician never had to go hungry again if he lived modestly. "What is this magician's name, perhaps I know him?"

"Milamber."

The old man shook his head. "I have not heard of him. Where does he abide?"

Laurie looked to the west, where the sun set behind the hills. With strong emotions in his voice, he said, "Far from here, my friend. Very far from here."

THE SHIP beat against the waves, while the crew reefed the sails. Laurie and Kasumi stood on deck watching the spires and towers of Rillanon as

the ship put into harbor. "A fabulous city," said the former Tsurani officer. "Not as large as the cities of home, but so different. All those tiny fingers of stone and the colors of the banners make it look like a city of legend."

"Strange," said Laurie, "Pug and I felt the same when we first saw Jamar. I suppose it is simply that they're so different from each other." They stood on the open deck, cool in the breezes, but still able to feel the warmth of the sun. Both were dressed in the finest clothing they could buy in Salador, for they wished to be presentable at court and knew they had little chance of being admitted to see the King should they look like simple vagabonds.

The ship's captain ordered the last sails taken in, and the ship slid into place alongside the docks a few moments later. Ropes were thrown to men waiting on the quay, and the vessel was quickly made fast. As soon as they were able, the two travelers were down the gangway and making their way through the city. Rillanon, the fabled and an capital of the Kingdom of the Isles, stood bedecked in colors, flags waving brightly in the sunlight, but there was an undercurrent of tension in the atmosphere of the streets and markets. Everywhere they passed, people spoke in hushed tones, as if they feared someone might overhear and even the hawkers in the street stalls seemed to offer their wares halfheartedly.

It was nearly the noon hour, and without seeking rooms, they headed straight for the palace. When they reached the main gate, an officer in the purple and gold of the Royal Household Guard inquired their business.

Laurie said, "We bring messages of the greatest importance to the King, regarding the war."

The officer considered. They were dressed well enough and didn't appear to be the usual madmen with predictions of doom, or prophets of some nameless truth, but they were not officials of the court or army either. He decided on the course of action followed most often in the armies of all nations in all times: passing them along to a higher authority.

A guard escorted them to the office of an assistant to the Royal Chancellor. Here they were made to wait for a half hour before the assistant would see them. They entered the man's office and were confronted by the Steward of the Royal Household, a self-important little man with a potbelly and a chronic wheeze when he spoke. "What business do you gentlemen have?" he inquired, making it clear that his estimation of them was provisional.

"We carry word to the King regarding the war," Laurie answered.

"Oh?" he sniffed, "and why aren't these documents or messages or ' -whatever they are being delivered by the proper military pouch?"

Kasumi, obviously frustrated with the wait now that they were in the place, said, "Let us speak with someone who can take us to the King."

The Steward of the Royal Household looked outraged. "I am Baron Gray. I am the one to whom you will speak, man! And I have a good mind to have the guards toss you into the street. His Majesty cannot be bothered with every charlatan who tries to seek an audience. I am the

one you must satisfy, and you have not."

Kasumi stepped forward and gripped the man by the front of his tunic. "And I am Kasumi of the Shinzawai. My father is Kamatsu, Lord -of the Shinzawai, and warchief of the Kanazawai Clan. I will see your King.

Lord Gray paled visibly. He frantically pulled at Kasumi's hand and tried to speak. His shock at what he had just heard and what he felt at being handled this way raced within him. It all proved to be too much for him to speak. He nodded frantically until Kasumi released him. Brushing at his tunic front, the man said, "The Royal Chancellor will be informed-at once."

He walked to a door, and Laurie watched him in case he called for guards, thinking them madmen. Whatever else the man thought, KAsumi's manner convinced him he was something quite different from anything heretofore seen. A messenger was sent, and in a few minutes an elderly man entered the room.

He simply said, "What is it?"

"Your Grace," said the Steward, "I think you had best talk to these men and consider if His Majesty should see them."

The man turned to study the two other men in the office. "I am Duke Caldric, the Royal Chancellor. What reason do you have to see His Majesty?"

Kasumi said, "I bring a message from the Emperor of Tsuranuanni."

The KINc sAT in a pavilion on a balcony overlooking the harbor. Below, a " mountain river passed directly before the palace, part of the original defense design though no longer needed as a moat. Graceful bridges could be seen arching above it, carrying people from one side of the river to the other.

King Rodric sat, seemingly attentive to what Kasumi was saying. He toyed absently with a golden ball in his right hand, while Kasumi outlined in detail the Emperor's message of peace. '

Rodric was silent for a while after Kasumi finished, as if weighing; what he had heard. Kasumi handed a sheaf of documents to Duke Caldric, then waited for the King's answer. After another moment of silence Kasumi added, "The Emperor's proposals are outlined in these parchments in detail, Your Majesty, should you wish to study them at your leisure. I will wait upon your convenience to carry your reply." "

Still Rodric was silent, and the courtiers gathered nearby looked at one another nervously. Kasumi was about to speak again when the king said, "I am always amused when watching my little subjects hurryi about the city, like so many ants. I often wonder what they think, living out their simple little lives." He turned to look at the two emissaries.

"You know, I could order any one of them put to death. Just pick one out, from this very balcony, should I choose. I could just say to my guards, 'See that fellow in the blue cap? Go hack his head off,' and they would, you know. That's because I'm King."

Laurie felt a chill run up his back. This was worse than anything he had imagined. The King seemed not to have heard a single word spoken. Kasumi said very quietly in the Tsurani language, "If we should

fail, one of us must carry word back to my father."

At this, the King's head snapped up. His eyes grew wide and he spoke with a tremble in his voice.

'What is this? His voice rose in pitch. 'I will have no one whispering!'

His face took on a feral appearance.

'You know they are always whispering about me, the disloyal ones. But I

know who they are and I will see them on their knees

before me, yes I will. That traitor Kerus was on his knees

before I had him hanged. I would have hanged his family

had they not fled to Kesh.'

he then studied Kasumi. "You think to trick me with your strange story and these so-called documents. Any fool could see through your guise. You are spies!"

Duke Caldric looked pained and tried to calm the King. Several guards stood nearby, shifting their weight from foot to foot, uncomfortable at what they were hearing.

The King pushed the solicitous Duke away. His voice took on a nearhysterical tone. "You are agents of that traitor Borric. He and my uncle were plotting to take my throne. But I stopped that. My uncle Erland is dead. . . ." He paused for a moment, as if confused. "No, I mean he is ill. That is why my loyal Duke Guy was sent from Bas-Tyra to rule Krondor until my beloved uncle was well. . . ." His eyes seemed to clear for a moment, then he said, "I am not feeling well. Please excuse me. I will speak to you again tomorrow." He rose from his chair. After he had taken a step, he turned back to look at Laurie and Kasumi.

"What was it you wanted to see me about? Oh yes, peace. Yes, that is good. This war is a terrible thing. We must end it so that I can go back to my building. We must begin the building again."

A page took the King's arm and led him away. The Royal Chancellor said, "Follow me, and say nothing."

He hurried them through the palace and led them to a room with two guards before the door. One guard opened the door for them, and they entered. Inside they found a bedroom with two large beds and a table with chairs in the corner. The chancellor said, "Your arrival is poorly timed. Our King is, as you no doubt can see, a sick man, and I fear that he will not recover. I hope he will be better able to understand your message tomorrow. Please stay here until you are sent for. A meal will be brought to you."

He crossed over to the door, and before he left said, "Until tomorrow."

A shout AWOKE them in the night. Laurie rose quickly and went to the window. Peering through the curtains, he could see a figure on the balcony below. In his nightshirt, King Rodric stood sword in hand, poking into the bushes. Laurie opened the window as Kasumi joined him. From below they could hear the King's cries: "Assassins! They have come!" Guards ran out and searched the bushes, while court pages led the shrieking monarch back to his room.

Kasumi said, "In truth, the gods have touched him. They must surely

hate your nation."

Laurie said, "I am afraid, friend Kasumi, that the gods have little to do with this. Right now I think we had best see to finding a way out of here. I have a feeling that His Royal Majesty is ill suited for the finer points of negotiating a peace. I think we had best make our way west and speak with Duke Borric."

"Will he be able to stop the war, this Duke?"

Laurie crossed over to the chair upon which his clothing was draped. Picking up his tunic, he said, "I hope so. If the lords here can watch the King behave in such a manner and do nothing, then we will have civil war soon. Better to settle one war before beginning another."

They dressed quickly. Laurie said, "Let us hope we can find a ship putting out on the morning tide. If the King orders the port closed, we are trapped. It is a long swim."

As they gathered up their belongings, the door opened and the Royal Chancellor entered. He stopped and saw them standing there, fully dressed. "Good," he said, quickly closing the door. "You have as much sense as I had hoped you would. The King has ordered the spies put to death."

Laurie was incredulous. "He thinks us spies?"

Duke Caldric sat in one of the chairs by the table, fatigue clearly showing on his face. "Who knows what His Majesty is thinking, these days? There are a few of us who try to stay his more terrible impulses, but it becomes more and more difficult each day. There is a sickness in him that is terrible to watch. Years ago he was an impetuous man, it is true, but there was also a vision to his plans, a certain mad brilliance that could have made this the greatest nation in Midkemia.

"There are many in the court now who take advantage of him, using his fears to further their own designs. I am afraid that soon I'll be branded traitor and join the others in death."

Kasumi buckled on his sword. "Why stay, Your Grace? If this is true, why not come with us to Duke Borric?"

The Duke looked at the older son of the Shinzawai. "I am a noble of the Kingdom, and he is my King. I must do whatever I can to keep him from harming the Kingdom, even if the price is my life, but I cannot raise arms against him, nor aid those who do. I don't know how things are with your world, Tsurani, but here I must stay. He is my King."

Kasumi nodded. "I understand. In your place, I would do the same. You are a brave man, Duke Caldric."

The Duke stood. "I am a tired man. The King has taken strong drink from my hand. He will drink from no other, for he fears poison.

I had the surgeon give him something for sleep. You should be out to sea when he awakens. I don't know if he will remember your visit, but rest assured that someone will remind him within a day, or two at the outside. So do not linger. Make straight for Lord Borric and tell him what has happened."

Laurie said, "Is Prince Erland truly dead?"

"Yes. Word reached us a week ago. His failing health could not withstand the cold dungeon. Borric is now heir to the throne. Rodric has never wed: his fear of others is too deep. The fate of the Kingdom rests with Borric. Tell him so."

They crossed to the door. Before the Duke opened it, he said, "Also tell him that it is likely I will be dead should he come to Rillanon. It will be a good thing, for I would have to stand against any who raised arms against the Royal Standard."

Before Laurie or Kasumi could say anything, he opened the door. Two guards stood outside, and the Duke ordered them to escort Laurie and Kasumi to the docks. "The Royal Swallow is anchored in the harbor. Give this to the captain." He held out a piece of paper to Laurie. "It is a royal warrant, commanding him to carry you to Salador." He held out a second paper. "This is another, commanding any of the Armies of the Kingdom to aid your travel."

They grasped each other by the hand, then the two emissaries followed the guards down the corridor. Laurie looked over his shoulder at Caldric as they left. The old Duke waited, stoop-shouldered and tired, his face lined by worry and sorrow, as well as fear. As they turned a corner, losing sight of the Duke, Laurie thought no price in the world would make him exchange places with that old man.

THE Horses were lathered. The riders whipped them up the hill. They were on the last leg of their journey to Lord Borric, begun over a month before, and the end was in sight. The Royal Swallow had sped them to Salador, where they had left at once for the West. They had slept little along the way, trading for fresh mounts or commandeering them, whenever possible, from horse patrols with the royal warrant given them by Caldric. Laurie wasn't sure, but he suspected they had covered the distance faster than it had ever been traveled before.

Several times since leaving Zun, they had been challenged by soldiers. Each time they had presented the Chancellor's warrant and were passed through. Now they approached the Duke's camp. The Tsurani Warlord had unleashed his major offensive. The Kingdom forces had held for a week, then collapsed, when ten thousand fresh Tsurani soldiers had come pouring through their lines, tipping the 'balance. The fighting had been bitter then, a raging, running battle lasting three days, before the Kingdom army was finally routed. When it was over, a large portion of the front had fallen and the Tsurani had thrown up a salient out of the North Pass. Now the elves and dwarves, as well as the castles of the Far Coast, were cut off from the main force of the Kingdom army. There was no communication of any sort, for the pigeons used to carry messages had been destroyed when the old camp had been overrun. The fate of the other fronts was unknown.

The Armies of the West were regrouping, and it took Laurie and Kasumi some time to find the headquarters camp. As they rode up to the command pavilion, they saw signs of bitter defeat on every side. It was the worst setback of the war for the Kingdom. Everywhere they looked they saw wounded or sick men, and those who showed no wounds had the look of despair.

A guard sergeant inspected their warrant and sent a guard with them to show them where the Duke's tent lay.



They reached the large command tent, and a lackey took their mounts from them as the guard went inside. A moment later a tall young man, blond-bearded and wearing the tabard of Crydee, came out. Behind him appeared a stout man with a grey beard - a magician by his garb and another man, large, with a ragged scar down his face. Laurie wondered if they might be old friends Pug had spoken of, but quickly focused his attention on the young officer, who stopped before him. "I bring a message to Lord Borric."

The young man smiled a bitter smile, then said, 'You may give me the message, sir. I am Lyam, his son.' Laurie said, "I mean no disrespect, Highness, but I must speak with the Duke in person. So I was instructed by Duke Caldric."

At mention of the Royal Chancellor's name, Lyam exchanged glances with his companions, then held aside the tent flap. Laurie and Kasumi entered, the others following. Inside, there was a small brazier burning and a large table with maps upon it. Lyam led them to another section of the huge tent, curtained off from the rest. He pulled back the hangings and they saw a man lying upon a sleeping pallet.

He was a tall man, with dark hair streaked with grey. His face was drawn, drained of blood, his lips nearly blue. His breathing was ragged, each breath rattling loudly as he slept. He wore clean bed clothing, but heavy bandages could be seen beneath his loose collar.

Lyam put back the hangings as another man entered the tent. Old, with a near-white mane of hair, he was still erect and broad-shouldered. Softly he said, "What is this?" Lyam answered, "These men bring messages for Father from Caldric."

The old warrior stuck out his hand. 'Give them to me.'

When Laurie hesitated, the man nearly barked, "Damn it, fellow, I'm : Brucal. With Borric wounded, I'm commander of the Armies of the West."

'Laurie said, "I've no written message, Your Grace. Duke Caldric says to introduce my companion. This is Kasumi of the Shinzawai, emissary of the Emperor of Tsuranuanni, who carries an offering of peace to the King.'

Lyam said, 'is there to be peace at last?'

Laurie shook his head. "Sadly, no. The Duke also said to say this: the King is mad, and the Duke of Bas-Tyra has slain Prince Erland. He fears only Lord Borric can save the Kingdom.'

Brucal was visibly shaken by the news. To Lyam he quietly said, "Now we know the rumours to be true. Erland was Guy's prisoner. Erland dead. I can scarcely believe it.' Shaking off his shock, he said, 'Lyam, I know

your mind is upon your father now, but you must bend thought to this: your father is near death, you will soon be Duke of Crydee. And with Erland dead, you will also be heir to the throne by right of birth . '

Brucal sat heavily upon a stool near the map table. "This is a heavy burden thrust upon you, Lyam, but others in the West will look to you for leadership as they once looked to your father. If there was ever any love between the two realms, it is now strained to the breaking point, with Guy upon the throne in Krondor. It is now clear for all to see, Bas-Tyra means to be King, for a mad Rodric cannot be allowed his throne much longer.' He fixed Lyam with a steady gaze. 'You will soon have to decide what we in the West shall do. Upon your word, we have civil war.'

29

Decission

The Holy City was festive.

Banners flew from every tall building. People lined the streets, throwing flowers before the nobles who were carried on their litters to the stadium. It was a day of high celebration, and who could feel troubled on such a day?

One who did feel troubled arrived in the pattern room of the stadium, the final reverberations of a chime signalling the appearance of a Great One of Tsuranuanni.

Milamber shrugged off his preoccupation for a moment as he left the pattern room, near the central gallery of the Grand Imperial Stadium. The crowd of Tsurani nobles, idling away the time before the games began, parted to allow Milamber to pass through the archway leading to the magicians' seats. Glancing around the small sea of black robes, he noticed Shimone and Hochopepa, who were keeping a place for him.

They signalled greetings as he left the aisle between the magicians' section and the imperial party's and joined them. Below, on the arena floor, some of the dwarf-like folk from Tsubar - the so-called Lost Land across the Sea of Blood - were fighting large insect creatures, like cho-ja but without intelligence. Soft wooden swords and essentially harmless bites from mandibles provided a conflict more comic than dangerous. The commoners and lesser nobles already in their seats laughed in appreciation. These contests kept them amused while the great and near-great were waiting to enter the stadium. Tardiness in Tsuranuanni became a virtue when one reached a certain social level.

Shimone said, "It is a shame you took so long getting here, Milamber. There was a singularly fine match a short while ago."

"I was under the impression the killing wasn't to begin just yet."

Hochopepa, munching nuts cooked in sweet oils, said, "True, but our friend Shimone is something of an aficionado of the games."

Shimone said, "Earlier young officers of noble family fought with training weapons to first blood, to better display their skills and win honors for their clans-

"Not to mention the fruits of some rather heavy wagering," interjected Hochopepa.

Ignoring the remark, Shimone continued. "There was a spirited match between sons of the Ornalmar and the Keda. I've not seen a better display in years."

While Shimone described the match, Milamber let his gaze wander. He could see the small standards of the Keda, Minwanabi, Oaxatucan, Xacatecas, Anasati, and other great families of the Empire. He noticed that the banner of the Shinzawai was absent, and wondered at it. Hochopepa said, "You seem much preoccupied, Milamber."

Milamber nodded agreement. "Before leaving for today's festival, I received word that a motion to reform land taxes and abolish debt slavery had been introduced in the High Council yesterday. The message came from the Lord of the Tuclamekla, and I couldn't for the life of me understand why he sent it until, near the end, he thanked me for providing the concepts of social reform the motion was intended to enact. I was appalled at such an action."

Shimone laughed. "Had you been so thick-witted a student, you'd still be wearing the white robe."

Milamber looked back blankly, and Hochopepa said, "You go about causing all sorts of rumblings with your speeches before the Assembly, constantly harping on all manner of social ills, and then sit dumbfounded because someone out there listened?"

"What I said to our brother magicians was not intended for discussion outside the Assembly halls."

"How unreasonable," said Hochopepa. "Someone in the Assembly spoke to a friend who wasn't a magician!"

"What I'd like to know," said Shimone, "is how this potful of reforms placed before the High Council by the Hunzan Clan has your name appended to it?"

Milamber looked uncomfortable, to the delight of his friends. "One of the young artists who worked on the murals at my estate is a son of the Tuclamekla. We did discuss differences between Tsurani and Kingdom cultures and social values, but only as an outgrowth of our discussions of the differences in styles of art."

Hochopepa looked skyward, as if seeking divine guidance. "When I heard the Party for Progress-which is dominated by the Hunzan Clan, which is dominated by the Tuclamekla. Family-sited you as inspiration, I could scarcely believe my hearing, but now I can see your hand is ; in every problem plaguing the Empire." He looked at his friend with a mock-serious expression. "Tell me, is it true the Party for Progress is going to change its name to the Party of Milamber?"

Shimone laughed while Milamber fixed Hochopepa with a baleful:

look. "Katala thinks it amusing when I get upset by this sort of thing, Hocho. And you might think it funny as well, but I want it publicly known I did not intend for this to happen. I simply offered some observations and opinions, and what the Hunzan Clan and the Party for Progress does with them is not my doing."

Hochopepa said in chiding tones, "I fear that if so famous a personage as yourself wishes not to have such things occur, then such a personage should have his mouth sewn shut."

Shimone laughed, and Milamber felt his own mirth rise. "Very well, Hocho," answered Milamber. "I will take the blame. Still, I don't know if the Empire is yet ready for the changes I think needed."

Shimone said, "We have heard your arguments before, Milamber, but today is not the time, nor is this the place for social debate. Let us attend to the matters at hand. Remember, many of the Assembly are offended by your concerns over matters they judge political. And while I tend to support your notions as refreshing and progressive, keep in mind that

you are making enemies."

Trumpets and drums sounded, signaling the approach of the Imperial Party and cutting off further conversation. The Tsubar folk and the insectoids were chased from the arena, handlers herding them away. When the field was cleared, grounds keepers hurried out with rakes and drags to smooth the sand. The sound of the trumpets could be heard again, and the first members of the imperial procession, heralds in the imperial white, entered. They carried long, curved trumpets, fashioned from the horns of some large beast, which curled around their shoulders to end above their heads. They were followed by drummers who beat a steady tattoo. When they were in position in the front of the imperial box, the Warlord's honor guard entered. Each wore armor and helm finished in needra hide bleached free of all color. Around the breastplate and helm of each, precious gold trim gleamed in the sun. Milamber heard Hochopepa mutter at the waste of this rare metal.

When they were stationed, a senior herald shouted, "Almecho, Warlord!" and the crowd rose, cheering. He was accompanied by his retinue including several in black robes—the Warlord's pet magicians, as the others of the Assembly referred to them. Chief among these were the two brothers, Elgahar and Ergoran.

Then the herald cried, "Ichindar! Ninety-one times Emperor!" The crowd roared its approval as the young Light of Heaven made his entrance.

He was attended by priests of each of the twenty orders. The crowd stood thundering. On and on it went, and Milamber wondered if the love of the Tsurani people would sustain the Light of Heaven should a confrontation between Warlord and Emperor take place. In spite of the Tsurani reverence for tradition, he did not think the Warlord a man to step down meekly from his office—a thing unheard of in history should the Emperor so order.

As the noise died down, Shimone said, "It seems, friend Milamber, that the contemplative life doesn't suit the Light of Heaven. Can't say that I blame him, sitting around all day with no one for company but a lot of priests and silly girls chosen for their beauty instead of conversational ability. Must become frightfully boring."

Milamber laughed. "I doubt most men would agree."

Shimone shrugged. "I constantly forget you were quite old when you were trained, and you have a wife also."

At mention of wives, Hochopepa looked pained. He interrupted.

"The Warlord is going to make an announcement."

Almecho rose and held his hands aloft for silence. When the stadium fell quiet, his voice rang out. "The gods smile upon Tsuranuanni! I bring news of a great victory over the otherworld barbarians! We have crushed their greatest army, and our warriors celebrate! Soon all the lands called the Kingdom will be laid at the Light of Heaven's feet." He turned and bowed deferentially to the Emperor.

Milamber felt a stab at the news. Without being aware, he began to stand, only to have Hochopepa grip his arm and hiss, "You are Tsurani!"

Milamber shook himself free of the unexpected shock and composed himself. "Thank you, Hocho. I nearly forgot myself."

Hush!" said Hochopepa.

They returned their attention to the Warlord. ". . . and as a sign of ~ devotion to the Light of Heaven, we dedicate these games to his honor." A cheer rang through the arena, and the Warlord sat down.

Milamber spoke quietly to his friends. "It seems the Emperor is less than ecstatic at the news." Hochopepa and Shimone turned to watch the Emperor, who was sitting with a stoic expression upon his face.

Hochopepa said, "He hides it well, but I think you are right, Milamber. Something in all this disturbs him."

Milamber said nothing, knowing well enough the cause: this victory would blunt the Blue Wheel peace initiative, and would gain the Warlord more power at the Emperor's expense.

Shimone tapped Milamber upon the shoulder. "The games begin."

As the doors on the arena floor opened to admit the combatants, Milamber studied the Emperor. He was young, in his early twenties, and possessed a look of intelligence. His brow was high, and his reddishbrown hair was allowed to grow to his shoulders. He turned in Milamber's direction, to speak with a priest at his side, and Milamber could see his clear green eyes glint in the sun. Their eyes made contact for a moment, and there was a brief flicker of recognition, and Milamber thought: So you have been told of my part in your plan. The Emperor continued his conversation, without missing a beat, and no one else saw the exchange.

Hochopepa said, "This is a clemency spectacle. They will all fight until only one stands. He will be pardoned for his crimes."

"What are their crimes?" Milamber asked.

Shimone answered. "The usual. Petty theft, begging without temple authority, bearing false witness, avoiding taxes, disobeying lawful orders, and the like."

"What about capital crimes?"

"Murder, treason, blasphemy, striking ones master, all are unpardonable crimes." His voice rose to carry over the crowd noises. "They are put in with war prisoners who will not serve as slaves. They are sentenced to fight over and over until they are killed."

A guard of soldiers left the floor, abandoning the sand to the prison- ers.

Hochopepa said, "Common criminals. There will be little sport."

There seemed to be accuracy in the remark, for the prisoners were a sad-looking lot. Naked but for loincloths, they stood with weapons and shields that were foreign to them. Many were old and sick, seemingly lost and confused, holding their axes, swords, and spears loosely at their sides.

The trumpet sounded the start of combat, and the old and sick ones were quickly killed. Several had never even raised their weapons in defense, being too confused to try to stay alive. Within minutes nearly half the prisoners lay dead or dying on the sand. Shortly the action slackened, as combatants came to face opponents of more equal skill and cunning. Slowly the numbers diminished, and the free-flowing riotous nature of the contest changed. Occasionally when an opponent fell, a combatant was left standing next to another fighting pair. Often this resulted in three-way combat, which the mob approved with loud cheering, as the awkward combat would result in an excess of bloodshed and pain.

At the end three fighters remained. Two of them had not managed to resolve their conflict. Both were on the verge of exhaustion. The third man approached cautiously, keeping equal distance between himself and both men, looking for an advantage.

He had it a few seconds later. Using knife and sword, he jumped forward and dealt one of the combatants a blow to the side of the head that felled him. Shimone said, "The idiot! Couldn't he see the other man is the stronger fighter? He should have waited until one man was clearly at an advantage, then struck at him, leaving the weaker opponent to fight."

Milamber felt shaky. Shimone, his former teacher, was his closest friend after Hochopepa. Yet for all his education, all his wisdom, he was howling after the blood of others as if he were the most ignorant commoner in the least expensive seat. No matter how he tried, Milamber could not master the Tsurani enthusiasm for the death of others. He turned to Shimone and said, "I'm sure he was a little too busy to trouble himself over the finer points of tactics." His sarcasm was lost on Shimone, closely watching the combat.

Milamber noticed Hochopepa was ignoring the contest. The wily magician was taking note of every conversation in the stands: to him the games were only another opportunity to study the subtle aspects of the Game of the Council. Milamber found this blindness to the death and suffering below as disturbing as Shimone's enthusiasm.

The fight was quickly over, the man with the knife winning. The crowd greeted the victory with enthusiasm. Coins were thrown on the sand, so that the victor would return to society with a small amount of capital.

While the arena was being cleared, Shimone called over a herald and inquired about the balance of the day's activities. He turned to the others, obviously pleased at the news. "There are only a few matched pairs, then two special matches, a team of prisoners against a starving harulth, and a match between some soldiers from Midkemia and captured Thuril warriors. That should prove most interesting." ~

Milamber's expression indicated that he didn't agree. Judging the time right for the question, he said, "Hocho, have you noticed any of

the Shinzawai Family in attendance?"

He glanced around the stadium, looking for the family banners of the more prominent houses of the Empire. "Minwanabi, Anasati, Tonmargu, Xacatecas, Acoma . . . No, Milamber. I can't say if any of your former, ah, benefactors are to be seen about. Not that I would expect them to be."

"Why?"

"They find themselves in the Warlord's bad graces of late. Something to do with failing some task or another he gave them. And I have heard that they are considered suspect, despite their clan's suddenly rejoining the war effort. The Kanazawai Clan is lost in its past glories, and the Shinzawai are the most old-fashioned of the lot."

Through the afternoon the matches wore on, each more artful than the previous as the skill level of the opponents increased. Soon the pairs were done. Now the crowd waited in hushed anticipation, even the nobles quieted, for the next event was unusual. A team of twenty fighters, Midkemian from their size, marched out into the center of the arena. They carried ropes, weighted nets, spears, and long curved knives. They wore only loincloths, their bodies oiled and gleaming in the late afternoon light. They stood around looking relaxed, but the soldiers in the crowd recognized the subtle signs of tension common to fighters before a battle. After a minute the large double doors at the opposite end of the stadium opened, and a six-legged horror came shambling into the arena.

The harulth was all long teeth and sharp claws, complete with a belligerent attitude and a hide like armour, and close to the size of a Midkemian elephant. It hesitated only long enough to blink at the light, then charged straight at the party of men before it.

They scattered before the creature, seeking to confuse it. The harulth, through simple- or single-mindedness, pursued one hapless fellow. In three enormous strides he found the man underfoot, then gobbled him down in two bites. The others regrouped behind the animal and quickly deployed the nets. The hexapod spun about, faster than looked possible for a creature of such bulk, and charged again. This time the men waited until the last moment, tossed the nets, then dove away. The nets were edged with hooks to catch in the thick hide of the beast. It stepped into them and soon was busily tearing apart the mesh. While it was momentarily occupied, the spearmen ran in to strike. The harulth reacted in confusion, not being sure from which quarter its torment originated. The spears were proving ineffectual, for they could not penetrate the hide of the beast. Quickly realizing the futility of this approach, one fighter grabbed another and pointed to the rear of the creature. They dashed back towards the tail, which was sweeping back and forth along the ground with the force of a battering ram.

They conferred momentarily, then dropped their spears as the creature decided upon a target. It lashed forward and had another man in its

maw. For a moment it was still as it swallowed its prey. The two men at the rear ran forward, leaping high up onto the tail of the animal. It seemed not to notice for a moment, then reacted by swinging around violently, throwing the second man off. Having come completely about, it stopped to devour the stunned man. The other somehow contrived to hang on and employed the few moments the harulth used to eat his comrade to pull himself higher on the creature's tail, where it joined the animal's haunches. With an overhand stroke he plunged his long-bladed knife between two vertebrae where they were outlined by loose-hanging skin. It was a desperate gamble, and the stadium crowd screamed approval.

The knife penetrated the tough cartilage between the bone segments and pierced the spinal column. The creature bellowed with rage and started to spin, threatening to toss the unwelcome rider, but in a moment the rearmost pair of legs collapsed. The harulth stood baffled for a moment, its two forward pairs of legs pulling against the dead weight of its hind quarters. Twice it tried vainly to snap at its small tormentor, but its thick neck was insufficient for the task. The man pulled the blade loose and crawled forward along the spine while the surviving spearmen darted in and out, distracting the creature. Three times he was nearly tossed off the animal's back, but somehow he managed to retain his position. When he found himself slightly forward of the middle pair of legs, he drove his blade between vertebrae. The central legs collapsed an instant later, and the man was thrown clear of the animal's back. The harulth screamed its rage and pain, but was effectively immobilized. The fighters backed away and waited. Two spinal cuts proved to be enough, for minutes later the harulth fell over in shock, thrashed its forelegs for a time, and lay still.

The crowd shouted its enthusiastic approval of the contest, for never had a group of fighters bested a harulth without losing at least five times as many men. In this contest only three had died. The fighters stood around, exhaustion causing weapons to fall from limp fingers. The battle had lasted less than ten minutes, but the expenditure in energy, concentration, sweat, and fear had worn each man to nearprostration.

Numbly oblivious to the crowds cheering, they stumbled toward the exit. Only the man who had actually driven in the knife showed any expression, and he was openly weeping as he moved across ~ the sand.

"Why do you think that man is so distraught?" asked Shimone. "It was a grand triumph."

Milamber said in a voice forced to calmness, "Because he is exhausted and afraid, and sick from it." He then added softly, "And he is very far from home." He swallowed hard, struggling against outrage, then said, "He knows it is for nothing. Again and again he will march into this arena, to fight other creatures, other men, even friends from his homeland, and sooner or later he will die." Hochopepa stared at Milamber, and Shimone looked confused. "But for chance, I might have been with those below," added Milamber. "Those who fought are men. They had families and homes, they loved and laughed. Now they wait to die."

Hochopepa waved a hand absently. "Milamber, you have a disturbing habit of taking things personally."



Milamber felt sickened and angered by the bloody spectacle, but forced those emotions down within himself. He was determined to stay. He would be Tsurani.

The sand was cleared and trumpets blew again, signaling the final match of the afternoon. A dozen proud-looking warriors dressed in leather battle harnesses, wristbands set with studs, and headdresses plumed in many colors came striding out of one end of the arena. Milamber had never seen their like in person, but recognized their dress from his vision on the tower. These were the descendants of the proud Serpent Riders, the Thuril. Each wore a hard-eyed expression of grim determination.

From the other end, twelve warriors in color-splashed imitations of Midkemean armor marched out. Their own metal armor had been deemed both too valuable and too dull for the contest, and Tsurani artisans had provided stylized imitations.

The Thuril stood watching the newcomers with implacable contempt.

Of all the races of humanity, only the Thuril had been able to withstand the Empire. The Thuril were uncontestedly the finest mountain fighters in Kelewan, and their mountain holds and high farm pastures were impossible to conquer. They had held the Empire at bay for years until peace had been declared. They were a tall people, the result of their lack of interbreeding with the shorter races of Kelewan, whom they considered inferior.

The trumpets blew again, and a hush fell over the crowd. A herald shouted in a clear voice, "As these soldiers of the Thuril Confederacy have violated the treaty between their own nations and the Empire, by making war upon the soldiers of the Emperor, they have been cast out by their own people, who have named them outlaws and bound them over for punishment. They will fight the captives from the world of Midkemia. All will strive until one is left standing." The crowd cheered.

The trumpet sounded, and the fighters squared off. The Midkemians crouched, weapons at the ready, but the Thuril stood tall, defiant looks upon their faces. One of the Thuril strode forward, halting before the nearest Midkemean. With contemptuous tones he spoke rapidly and made a sweeping motion around the arena.

Milamber felt a hot flush of anger begin to grow inside, coupled with shame at what he was seeing. There were games in Midkemia—he had heard of them—but they were nothing like this. The men who fought in Krondor and other places throughout the Kingdom were professionals who made a living by fighting to first blood. Occasionally a duel to the death would be fought, but it was always a personal matter, after all other means of settling the dispute had been exhausted. This was a mindless waste of human life for the titillation of the bored and idle, the satiated in search of more and more vivid reminders that their own lives were worth something. Milamber looked around and felt disgust at the expressions on the faces of those nearby.

The Thuril warrior continued his ranting, while the Midkemean's watched, with something in their manner suggesting a shift of mood. Before, they were tensed, battle-ready; now they seemed almost relaxed. The Thuril continued pointing up at the assembled throng.

Then a Midkemian, tall and broad-shouldered, stepped forward as if to speak. The Thuril came on guard, his sword high, ready to strike. A voice rang out from behind, as another warrior said something that carried a note of reassurance. The first Thuril visibly relaxed.

The Midkemian slowly removed his helm, revealing a tired, haggard face, framed by damp, stringy black hair. He looked about the arena while the crowd began to whisper and grumble at the unexpected behavior of the warriors, and then gave a curt nod. He dropped his sword and shield and said something to his companions. Quickly the other fighters in the arena followed suit, and soon all weapons were lying upon the ground.

Milamber wondered at this strange behavior, and Shimone said, "This will end a shambles. The Thuril will not fight their own kind, and it seems they won't fight the barbarians either. I once saw six Thuril kill everyone sent against them, then refuse to fight one another. When the guards came to kill them, they fought, driving them back. Finally bowmen on the wall had to shoot them down. It was a disgrace. The crowd rioted, and the games director was torn to bits. Over a hundred citizens died."

Milamber felt relief: at least he would be spared the spectacle of Katala's people and his own killing one another. Then the crowd began to shout their disapproval, jeering the reluctant combatants.

Hochopepa nudged Milamber and said, "The Warlord appears less than amused by this."

Milamber saw the Warlord's livid expression as he watched his presentation to the Emperor turned into a farce. Almecho slowly rose from his place near the Light of Heaven and bellowed, "Let the fighting begin!"

Burly handlers, guards who worked on behalf of the games director, ran into the arena, wielding whips. They circled the motionless fighters and began lashing out at them. Milamber felt his gorge rise as the handlers laid about, tearing the exposed skin from the arms and legs of the Thuril and Midkemian soldiers. No stranger to the whip when in the swamp, he knew its terrible touch. He felt each stroke as it fell upon those on the sand below.

The crowd began to grow restive, for watching motionless men being whipped was not what they had come to see. Jeers and catcalls rang down upon those in the imperial box, and a few bolder souls threw litter and small coins into the arena, showing what they thought of such sport. Finally one of the handlers grew impatient, stepped up to a Thuril warrior, and struck him across the face with a whip handle. Before the handler could react, the Thuril sprang forward and tore the whip from the startled man's hands. In an instant he had it firmly wrapped about the man's throat, choking him.

The other handlers turned their attention to the warrior attacking their companion and began to flail wildly at him. After a dozen or so blows the Thuril began to wobble, and fell to his knees. But he held tightly to the whip, strangling the gasping handler. Again and again blows rained down upon the Thuril, until all his armor ran red with blood from the lashing. Still he held on to his victim.

When the handler died, eyes protruding from a blue face, whatever

strength left to the Thuril seemed to die as well. As the handler's limp body came to rest on the sand, the Thuril warrior fell beside him. It was a Midkemian soldier who reacted first. With cold detachment he simply picked up a sword and ran one of the handlers through. Then, as one, the Thuril and Midkemian soldiers had weapons in hand, and within a minute all the handlers were dead. Then, again as one, the prisoners threw their weapons to the ground.

Milamber battled to stay calm in the face of such display. He felt nothing but admiration for those men, They accepted death rather than slay one another. Possibly some of those men had ridden through the valley with him on the raid to discover the rift machine so many years before. Outwardly he appeared calm, a Tsurani, but inwardly he seethed. Hochopepa whispered, "I have a bad feeling here. Whatever gain Almecho sought from this day to bolster his position with the Emperor is badly shaken. I fear he is not taking well your former countrymen's reluctance to die for the entertainment of the Light of Heaven."

Milamber nearly spit when he said, "Damn such entertainment." He looked at Hochopepa with a burning expression, one never seen by the fat magician before. Milamber half stood as he added, "And damn all those who find pleasure in such bloody sport."

Hochopepa seized him by the arm and tried to pull him firmly into his seat, saying, "Milamber, remember yourself!"

Milamber pulled himself free, ignoring the command.

Milamber and his companions looked to the imperial box, where a guard captain conferred with the Warlord. Milamber felt a strange hot flush inside and for a moment battled a sudden impulse to use his powers to put the Warlord amid those below, to see how he fared against those who refused to die gracefully at his command.

Then Almecho's voice rang out, silencing all those nearby. "No, no bowmen. Those animals will not die a warrior's death." He turned to one of his pet magicians and issued instructions. The black-robed man . nodded and began to incant. Milamber felt his neck hairs rise as the presence of magic made itself known.

A hushed sound of awe swept about the stadium as those on the sand below fell senseless, to roll about in a daze.

The Warlord shouted, "Now go bind them, build a platform, and hang them for all to see."

Stunned silence greeted his words, then shouts of "No!"-"They are warriors!"-and-"This is without honor!" rang throughout the crowd.

Hochopepa closed his eyes and sighed audibly. He spoke to himself as much as his companions. "The Warlord lets his famous temper get the best of him once more, and now we have a debacle before us. This will not help his position in the High Council or the stability of the Empire."

Like an enraged beast at bay, the Warlord turned, and all nearby fell silent, but those at greater distances picked up the cries. By Tsurani standards this was too much of an indignity to be visited on any save those without honor. While balking the mob's sport, the prisoners had shown they were still fighting men, and as such deserved an honorable death.

Hochopepa turned to speak to Milamber, then stopped himself as he saw the expression on his friend's face. Milamber's anger was now fully

revealed, his rage a match for the Warlord's. Sensing something terrible was about to occur, Hochopepa sought Shimone's attention, only to find he was also silently watching Milamber's fearsome countenance. All Hochopepa could manage to say was a quiet "Milamber, no!" Then the slave-become-magician was moving.

He swept past the shocked Hochopepa, saying only, "See to the Emperor's safety." Milamber was reeling with the impact of sudden emotion bottled up for years, now surging free. A strange and powerful certainty struck him. I am not Tsurani! he acknowledged to himself. I could not be a party to this. For the first time since donning the black ~" robe, his two natures were in harmony. This was a dishonor by the standards of both cultures, something that filled him with a dread purpose free of any doubt.

Save those near the imperial box, the entire crowd was chanting "The sword, the sword, the sword," demanding a warrior's death for each man below. The rhythm became a pounding pulse beat for Milamber, heightening His nearly unchecked fUry.

Reaching a point between the magicians and the imperial box, Milamber regarded the soldiers and carpenters rushing onto the arena floor. The stunned Midkemians and Thuril were being bound like animals for slaughter, and the crowd's anger was reaching a dangerous level. Some of the younger officers of noble families in the lower levels of the stadium seemed ready to take swords and jump onto the sand, to contest personally for the prisoners' right to die as warriors. These had been valiant foemen, and many of those watching had fought against: both Thuril and Kingdom soldiers. They would willingly kill these men on the field of battle, but would not watch this humiliation visited on brave enemies. '

A black flood of anger, loathing, and sorrow poured through Milamber. His mind screamed in outrage, despite his attempts to control it. His head tilted back, and his eyes rolled up into his head, and as had happened twice before in his life, letters of fire appeared in his mind's eye. But never before had he had the strength to seize the moment, and with a nearly animal joy he dived into the newly opening well of power within. His right arm shot forward, and energy exploded from his hand, A bolt of blue flame, scintillating even in the sunlight, hurled downward, to strike the sand amid the Warlord's guards. Living men were swept in all directions, like leaves before the wind. Those just entering with the materials for the scaffolding were knocked to their knees by the blast, and those in the lower seats were stunned by its fury. All noise in the arena stopped as the crowd fell into mute shock.

All eyes turned to the source of that bolt, while those near him reflexively drew back. He was red-faced with anger, and the whites of his eyes showed around dark irises as he scanned the arena. With a short chopping motion of one hand, the magician said, "No more!" No one moved save Hochopepa and Shimone. They had no idea what Milamber's intentions were, but in the face of this act they took his command seriously. They hurried to where a half-stunned, half-fascinated young Emperor sat watching with everyone else in the stadium. . They quickly conferred with Ichindar, and a moment later the Emperor's seat was empty.

Milamber looked to his left as a bellow of outrage sounded. "Who dares this!"

Milamber was confronted by the sight of the Warlord, standing like an enraged demigod in his white armor. The Warlord's expression matched Milamber's.

"I dare this!" Milamber shouted back. "This cannot be, will not be! No more will men die for the sport of others!"

Barely holding himself in check, Almecho, Warlord of the Nations of Tsuranuanni, screamed, "By what right do you do this thing!" The cords on his neck stood out clearly, and every muscle of his body quivered as sweat beaded his brow.

Milamber's voice lowered, and his words came carefully measured with controlled, defiant rage. "By my right to do as I see fit." He then spoke to a nearby guard. "Those on the arena floor are to be released. They are free!"

The guard hesitated for a moment, then his Tsurani training came to the fore. "Your will, Great One."

The Warlord shouted, "You will stay!"

The crowd hissed with intaken breath. In the history of the Empire such a confrontation between Great One and Warlord had never occurred.

The guard stopped, and Milamber spoke through a snarl. "My words are as law. Go!"

Suddenly the guard was moving, and the Warlord screamed his rage. "You break the law! No one may free a slave!"

His anger boiling back up again, Milamber shouted back, "I can! I am outside the law! "

The Warlord fell back, as if struck an invisible blow. In his life no one had dared to thwart his will in this manner. No Warlord in history had ever been forced to endure such public shame. He was dazed.

Near the Warlord another magician leaped to his feet. "I call you ~ traitor and false Great One. You seek to undermine the Warlord's rule and bring chaos to the order of the Empire. You will recant this effrontary

Instantly there was frantic activity as all within earshot scrambled to get clear of the two magicians. Milamber regarded the Warlord's pet.

"Do you think to match your powers against mine?"

The Warlord looked at Milamber with naked hatred on his face. He never took his eyes from the young magician's face as he said to his pet, "Destroy him!"

Milamber's arms shot upward, crossing at the wrists. Instantly a soft golden nimbus of light surrounded him. The other magician hurled a bolt of energy, and the blue ball of fire struck harmlessly against the gold shield.

Milamber tensed, suffused with anger. Twice before in his life, when attacked by the trolls and when fighting with Roland, he had reached into hidden reservoirs of power and drawn upon them. Now he tore aside the last barriers between his conscious mind and those hidden reserves. They were no longer a mystery to him but the wellspring from which all his power stemmed. For the first time in his experience, Milamber came to understand fully what he was, who he was: not a Black Robe, limited by the ancient teachings of one world, but an adept of the Greater Art, a master in full possession of all the energy provided by two

worlds.

The Warlord's magician regarded him in fear. Here was more than a curiosity, a barbarian magician. Here stood a figure to awe, arms stretched upward, body trembling with rage, eyes seemingly aglow with strength.

Milamber clapped his hands above his head, and thunder pealed, rocking those around him. Energy exploded upward from his hands, held high above his head. A vortex of coruscating forces spun above him, rising like a bowshot. The fountain continued until it was high overhead. It began to flatten, covering the stadium like a great canopy. The dazzling display continued briefly, then the skies seemed to explode, blinding many who were looking upward. The sky turned dark, and the sun faded as if grey veils were slowly being drawn before it. Milamber's voice carried to the farthest corner of the stadium as he said, "That you have lived as you have lived for centuries is no license for this cruelty. All here are now judged, and all are found wanting." More magicians departed, disappearing from their seats, but many yet remained. More judicious commoners fled by nearby exits, but still many waited, thinking this but another contest for their amusement. Many were too drunk or excited by the spectacle for the magician's warning to reach them.

Milamber's arm swept an arc around him. "You who would take pleasure from the death and dishonor of others, see then how well you face destruction!" A gasp from the crowd answered his pronouncement. Milamber raised one hand high overhead, and all became silent. Even the light summer breeze ceased. Then with a terrible strength, he spoke. They paled at his words, for it was as if death had become incarnate and had spoken. Echoing throughout the stadium were the words of Milamber: "tremble and despair, for I am Power!"

A shrill keening sound began, with Milamber at its source. The very air shuddered as mighty magic was forged. "Wind!" Milamber cried. A bitter breeze reeking of carrion, foul and loathsome in its touch, blew through the stadium. A low moan of sorrow and fear was carried away by the wind. It blew stronger and, each moment it grew, carried more menace, more despair. It turned colder, until it was stinging to those who had rarely known cold. Men wept at its biting caress, and high above the stadium, clouds formed in the murk.

The winds howled, drowning out the cries of the multitude in the arena. Nobles tried to flee, now too terrified to do anything but claw past their own families, trampling the old and slow underfoot. Many were buffeted to their knees, or knocked from the seats to the sands of the arena floor.

Great thunderheads, black and grey, raced overhead, seeming to swirl around a point directly over Milamber's head. The magician was engulfed in an eerie light, pulsating with energy. He stood at the center of the storm, a terrible figure in the dark. The wind shrieked its fury, but Milamber's voice cut through the sound like a knife.

"Rain!"

A cold rain fell, blown hard before the gale. Quickly it grew in tempo, becoming a pounding torrent, then a deluge. The cascade pelted those below, painfully driving them down, beating them senseless with a

frightening strength clearly unnatural. A few managed to flee to the tunnels, while others clutched at one another in terror.

Other magicians tried to counter the spells but could not, and fainted from the exertion. Never had there been such a display of raw power. Here was a true master of magic, one who could control the very elements, come into his own. The magician who had challenged Milamber lay back across his seat, stunned, his eyes blinking as he struggled to sort some semblance of order out of the chaos around. The Warlord tried to withstand the storm, struggling to remain upright and refusing to submit to the terror of those around him.

Milamber dropped his arm, then raised one hand before him, stretching outward. "Fire!" he shouted, and again all could hear him.

The clouds seemed to burn. The heavens erupted as sheets of terrible colors, flames of every hue, ran riot through the darkness. Jagged bolts of lightning flashed across the sky, as if the gods were announcing the final judgment of mankind. People screamed in primitive terror at the element gone mad.

Then the rain of fire began. Drops struck arms and clothing, faces and cloaks, and began to burn. Shrieks of pain came from all sides, and people tried vainly to swat out the fires that burned their flesh. More magicians disappeared from the arena, taking their unconscious comrades.

Milamber stood alone in the magicians' section. The stink of burned flesh filled the air, mixed with the acrid odor of fear.

Milamber crossed his arms before him. He turned his gaze downward. "Earth!"

From below a deep rumbling commenced. The ground under the stadium began to tremble slightly. The vibrations grew in intensity, and the air was filled with an angry buzzing, as if a swarm of giant insects had surrounded the arena. Then a low rumbling added its harmony to the buzzing, and the ground began to move.

The vibrations became a shaking, then a violent rolling, surging, motion.

Milamber stood calmly, as if on an island. It was as if the soil, the earth, had become fluid. People were thrown down onto the arena floor. The huge stadium throbbed from forces primeval. Statues tumbled from their pedestals, and the huge gates were ripped from their hinges, in a crackling splintering of ancient wood. They moved from before the tunnels in a staggering, drunken walk, then fell to the sand, crushing those who lay before them. Many of the beasts below the arena were driven mad by the earthquake and thrashed in their cages, smashing locks and opening doors. They fled the tunnels and raced over the fallen gates; they bellowed, howled, and roared at the fire rain. Enraged by terror, they fell upon the stunned spectators lying on the sand, killing at random. A man would sit dazed, absently slapping at the burning drops from the skies, while another a few feet away was being gutted by some horror from the distant forests.

Now the arena itself began to wail as the ancient stones moved, slipping across one another. Mortar a millennium old turned to dust in an instant as the very stadium crumbled. Cries for mercy were swept away by the winds or drowned in the cacophony of destruction. The fury mounted, and the world seemed ready to be torn asunder. Milamber raised his hands above his head again. He brought his palms

together, and the mightiest thunder peal of all sounded. Then, abruptly, the chaos ceased.

Above, the sky was clear and sunny, a light breeze once more blowing from the east. The ground stood as it should, motionless and solid, and the rain of fire was a memory.

The silence that followed was deafening. Then the groans of the injured and the sobs of the terrified could be heard. The Warlord remained standing, his face drained of all color, small burns scarring his features and arms. In place of the mighty leader of the Empire stood a man bereft of any emotion save terror. His eyes were wide enough to show whites. His mouth moved, as if he were trying to speak, but no words were forthcoming.

Milamber raised his hands overhead again, and the Warlord fell back with a sob of fear. The magician clapped his hands and was gone.

THE AFTERNOON BREEZE carried the scent of summer flowers. In the garden

Katala was playing a word game with William, she had insisted they should both learn the language of her husband's homeland.

It was almost evening, for they were farther east than the Holy City.

The sun was low in the west, and the shadows in the garden were long.

Without the chime announcing Milamber's arrival, Katala was startled when her husband appeared in the doorway of their home. She rose slowly from her seat, for she sensed at once something was wrong.

"Husband, what is it?"

William ran up to his father, while Milamber said, "I will tell you everything later. We must take William and flee."

William tugged on his father's black robe. "Papa!" he cried, demanding attention. Milamber picked up his son and hugged him tightly, then said, "William, we are going on a journey to my homeland. You must be a brave boy and not cry."

William stuck out his lower lip, for if his father was asking him not to cry, then there must be a very good reason to do so, but he nodded and held back the tears.

"Netoha! Almorella!" Milamber called, and in a moment the two servants entered the garden. Netoha bowed, but Almorella rushed to Katala's side. Katala had insisted she accompany them to Milamber's new home when he brought his family from the Shinzawai estate. She was more sister to Katala and aunt to William than a slave. She could see at once that something was wrong, and tears came unbidden to her eyes.

"You're leaving," she said, a statement more than a question.

Netoha looked at his master. "Your will, Great One?"

Milamber said, "We are leaving. We must. I am sorry." Netoha took the news stoically, in the proper Tsurani fashion, but Almorella embraced Katala, openly weeping.

Milamber said, "I wish to ensure that you are both provided for. I have prepared documents against this day. When we have gone, you will find all my work cataloged in my study. Above my study table, on the top shelf, you will find a parchment with a black seal upon it. I am giving the estate to you, Netoha." He said to Almorella, "I know you



two care for each other. The document giving Netoha the estate also contains a provision granting you your freedom, Almorella. He will make you a good husband. Even the Emperor cannot set aside a document bearing a Great One's seal, so do not worry."

Almorella's expression was a mixture of complete disbelief, happiness, and sorrow. She nodded slowly that she understood, thanks clearly showing in her eyes.

Milamber returned his attention to Netoha. "I am deeding the lower pasture land to Xanothis the herdsman. Provide well for the others of this household, Netoha.

"Now, in my study you will also find several parchments sealed with red wax. These must be burned at once. Whatever you do, do not break the seals before you burn them. All other works are to be sent to Hochopepa of the Assembly, with my deepest affection and the wish that he find them useful. He will know what to do with them."

Almorella again embraced Katala, then kissed William. Netoha said, "Quickly, girl. You're not mistress of this estate yet, and there is important work to do." The hadonra started to bow, then said, haltingly, "Great One, I . . . I wish you well." He quickly bowed and started for the study. Milamber could see a hint of moisture in his eyes.

Almorella, tears running down her cheeks, followed Netoha into the house. Katala turned to Milamber. "Now?"

"Now." As he took them to the pattern room, he said, "There is one thing I must find out before we attempt the rift." He held his wife, with their son between them, and willed himself to another pattern.

They were shrouded in a white haze for an instant, then were in a different room. They hurried through the door, and Katala saw they went into the home of the Shinzawai lord.

They hurried to Kamatsu's study and opened the door without ceremony.

Kamatsu looked up, annoyed at the interruption. His expression changed immediately when he saw who was at his door. "Great One, what is it?" he asked, as he arose. '

Milamber quickly conveyed the events of the day, and Katala paled at the recounting. The Lord of the Shinzawai shook his head. "You may have set processes in motion that will forever change the internal order of "the Empire, Great One. I hope it is not a death blow. In any event, it will

take years to gauge their effects. Already the Party for Progress is making overtures to the party for peace for alliance. In a short time you have had great effect upon my homeland."

Kamatsu continued, preventing Milamber from speaking.

"That is not a thing of the moment, though. You who were once my slave have learned greatly, but you are still not Tsurani. You must understand the Warlord cannot allow such a setback and save face. He most likely will take his life in shame , but those who follow his lead - his family, his

clan, his subordinates-will all mark you for death. Already there may be assassins hired, or magicians who are ready to act against you. You have no choice but to flee to your homeland with your family."

William decided it was appropriate now to cry, for in spite of his

attempts at bravery his mother was frightened, and the boy felt it. Milamber turned away from Kamatsu and incanted a spell, and William was immediately asleep. "He will sleep until we are safe." Katala nodded and knew it was for the best, but still she disliked the necessity.

"I have no fear of any magician, Kamatsu," Milamber said, "but I fear for the Empire. I know now that, no matter how hard my teachers in the Assembly tried, I can never be Tsurani. But I do serve the Empire. In my disgust over what I witnessed in the arena, I became sure of what I've suspected for some time now. The Empire must change its course, or it is doomed to fall. The rotten, weak heart of this culture cannot support its own weight much longer, and like a ngaggi tree with a rotten core, it will collapse under its own weight. There are other things, things of which I may not speak, that I have learned in my time here, that tell me great change must come.

"I must leave, for should I stay, the Assembly, the High Council, all the Empire will be divided. I would have difficulty leaving the Empire were it not in the best interest of Tsuranuanni for me to depart. That is my training. But before I leave, I must know, has there been word from Laurie and your son of the Emperor's overture of peace?"

"No. We know they disappeared during a skirmish the first night. Hokanu's men searched the area after the fight and found no signs of them, so it is assumed they were safely away. My younger son is certain they reached a road behind Kingdom lines. Since then we have had no further word. Other members of our faction wait with as much trepidation as I."

Milamber considered. "Then the Emperor is still not ready to act. I had hoped it might be soon, so we could safely leave under the truce, before opposition to me becomes organized. Now, with the announcement of victory over Duke Borric's army, we may have peace."

Kamatsu said, "It is clear you are not Tsurani, Great One. With the Warlord in disgrace from your destruction of games he dedicated to the Light of Heaven, the War Party will be in disorder. Now the Kanazawai Clan will once more remove itself from the Alliance for War. Our allies in the Blue Wheel will work doubly hard to press for a truce in the High Council. The War Party is without an effective leader. Even should the warlord prove shameless and not kill himself, he will be quickly removed, for the War Party needs a strong leader, and the Minwanabi are ambitious; for three generations they have sought the white and gold. But others in the High Council will press the claims as well. The War Party will be in disarray, and we shall gain time to strengthen our position, as the Game of the Council continues." '

Kamatsu looked long at Milamber. "As I have said, there are those who are already plotting to take your life. Make for your homeworld now. Do not delay, and you should likely win safely through. It might not occur to any but a few that you will strike for the rift at once. Any other Great One would take a week putting his house in order." He smiled at Milamber. "Great One, you were a fresh breeze in a stale room while you were with us. I am sorry to see you leave our land, but you must go at once."

"I hope the day will come when we may meet again as friends, Lord

of the Shinzawai, for there is much that our two people could learn from one another."

The Shinzawai lord placed his hand upon Milamber's shoulder. "I hope also for that day, Great One. I will send prayers with you. One thing more. If you should perchance see Kasumi in your homeworld, tell him his father thinks of him. Now go, and good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Milamber. He took his wife by the arm and hurried back toward the pattern room. When they reached it, a chime sounded and Milamber pushed his wife and son behind him. A brief haze of white appeared over the pattern in the floor, and Fumita stood there, startled. .

"Milamber!" he said, stepping forward.

"Stop, Fumita!"

The older magician stood still. "I mean you no harm. Word of what occurred has reached those of the Assembly not attending the games. The Assembly is in turmoil. Tapek and the other Warlord's pets demand your life. Hochopepa and Shimone argue on your behalf. Never has such discord been seen. In the High Council, the War Party demands an end to the independence of the Assembly during times of war, and the Party for Progress and the Party for Peace are in open alliance with the blue Wheel Party. The Empire is upside down."

The older magician seemed to droop visibly as he related this. He looked years older than Milamber had ever remembered seeing him. "I think you may have been right in many of your beliefs, Milamber. We . . . must have changes in the Empire if we are not to decay, but so many changes so quickly? I don't know."

There was a moment of silence between them, Milamber said, "What I did was for the Empire, Fumita. You must believe that."

The older magician nodded slowly. "I believe you, Milamber, or at least I wish to." He seemed to stand more erect. "Whatever the outcome there will be much for the Assembly to do when things have settled. Perhaps we can steer the Empire to a healthier course.

"But you must go quickly. No soldier will try to stop you, for only a few outside the Holy City know of your actions, but the Warlord's pets may already be seeking you out. You caught our brothers by surprise at the games, and none singly could stand against you, but if they coordinate against you, even your vaunted powers will avail you little. You would have to kill another magician, or be killed in turn."

"Yes, Fumita, I know. I must go. I have no desire to kill another magician, but I shall if I must."

Fumita looked pained at hearing this. "How are you to reach the rift? You haven't been to the staging area, have you?"

"No, but I go to the City of the Plains, and from there I can command a litter."

"It is too slow. The litter will take over an hour to reach the staging area." He reached into his robe and pulled out a transfer device. He held it out to Milamber. "The third setting will take you directly to the rift machine."

Milamber took it. "Fumita, I mean to try to close the rift."

Fumita shook his head. "Milamber, even with your powers I don't think you can. Scores of magicians worked to create the great rift, and

the controlling spells were established only on the Kelewan side. The Midkemian machine is only to stabilize the rift's location."

"I know, Fumita. You'll soon know, for I've sent my works to Hocho. My 'mysterious' research has been an intensive study of rift energies.

"I may now know more about them than any other magician in the ~ Assembly. I know it would be a desperate, possibly destructive, action from the Midkemian side, but this war must end."

"Then get free to your homeworld and wait. The emperor will act soon, I am sure. The Warlord could not have been handed a bigger blow by losing the war than the one you handed him in the arena. If the Light of Heaven orders peace, then perhaps we can deal with the question of the rift. Stay your hand until you've learned what the King's reaction to the peace offer is."

"Then you also play the Great Game?"

Fumita smiled. "I am not the only magician to descend into playing politics, Milamber. Hochopepa and I have been a part of this from the onset. Go now, and may the gods be with you. I wish you a safe journey and a long, prosperous life on your homeworld."

He then walked past Milamber and his family. Once he was out of sight, Milamber activated the device.

THE SOLDIER JUMPED. One moment he had been sitting under a tree, shaded from the setting sun's heat, then the next moment a magician with a woman and child suddenly appeared before him. By the time he was on his feet, they were moving toward the rift machine, several hundred yards away. When they reached the machine, a platform with tall poles rising up on either side of it, between which a glimmering "nothingness" could be seen, an officer who was in charge of the troops moving through snapped to attention.

"Get these men back from the platform."

"Your will, Great One." He barked orders, and the men fell back.

Milamber took Katala by the hand and led her through the rift.

One step, a moment of disorientation, and they were standing in the middle of the Tsurani camp in the valley in the Grey Towers. It was night, and campfires burned brightly. Several officers were startled by the unusual arrival, but stepped out of their way.

Milamber said, "Have you captured horses?"

One of the officers nodded dumbly.

"Bring two, at once. Saddled."

"Your will, Great One," said the man, and rushed off.

Soon a soldier brought two horses toward him. When the soldier came close, Milamber could see it was Hokanu. The younger Shinzawai son looked quickly about as he handed the reins to Milamber. "Great One, we have just received word something terrible has occurred at the Imperial Games, though the reports are vague. I suspect your sudden appearance here has something to do with those reports. You must be away quickly, for these are the Warlord's men in camp, and should they arrive at the same conclusion, there is no telling what they might risk."

Milamber held William while Katala mounted with Hokanu's aid. He handed their son up to her and mounted his own steed. "Hokanu, I

have just seen your father. Go to him, he has need of you."

"I will return to my father's estate, Great One." The young Tsurani hesitated, then added, "Should you see my brother, tell him I live, for he does not know."

Milamber said he would, then turned to Katala and took the reins of her horse. "Hold to the saddle horn, beloved. I will carry William." Without another word they rode out of camp. Several times guards started to challenge them, but the sight of the black robe stopped them. They rode for hours in the moonlight. Milamber could hear the shouts of soldiers as he led his family to safety.

Katala bore up under it all like the warriors she was descended from, and Milamber marveled at her. She had never sat a horse before, but she made no complaint. To be taken from her home and whisked away to a strange, dark world, where she knew no one, must be a frightening experience. She revealed a tough fiber to her character he had only guessed at before.

After the seemingly endless ride, a voice sounded from out of the darkness. Dim shadowy figures could be seen moving among the trees. "Halt! Who rides this night?" The voice was speaking the King's Tongue. The three riders halted, and the man in front, with relief in his voice, shouted, "Pug of Crydee!"

30

Upheaval

KuLGAN SAT QUIetLY.

It was a reunion tempered with sadness. Pug stood near Lord Borric's bed, openly showing his grief as the dying Duke smiled wanly up at him. Lyam, Brucal, and Meecham waited a short way off, speaking softly, and Katala distracted William while the Duke and Pug spoke.

Borric's voice came softly, weak from his illness, and his face contorted with pain as he struggled for breath. "I am glad to see you . . . returned to us, Pug. And doubly glad to see your wife and child." He coughed, and a foam appeared-at the corner of his mouth, flecked with blood

Katala's eyes were tearing, for the open affection her husband held for this man touched her. Borric motioned toward Kulgan, and the stout magician came to stand next to his former pupil. "Yes, Your Grace." Borric whispered, and Kulgan turned to Meecham. "Will you see Katala and the boy to our tent? Laurie and Kasumi are waiting there." Katala threw Pug a questioning look, and he nodded. Meecham had already picked up the boy, who regarded him with some skepticism. When they had left, Borric struggled to sit higher, and Kulgan helped him, placing pillows behind his back. The Duke coughed loudly and long, his eyes clenched tightly shut from pain.

When at last he could breathe again, he sighed, then spoke slowly. "Pug, do you remember when I rewarded you for saving Carline from trolls?" Pug nodded, afraid to speak for the emotions he felt. Borric continued, "Do you remember my promise of another gift?" Again Pug

nodded. "Would that Tully were here to give it to you now, but I will tell you in brief. I have long thought the Kingdom wastes one of its greatest resources by regarding magicians as outcasts and beggars. Kulgan's faithful service over the years has shown me I was right. Now you return, and though I understand only a little of what you've told, I can see you have become a master of your arts. It was my hope you would, for I have had a vision.

"I had left a sum of gold in trust for you, against the day you became a master magician. With it, I would like you and Kulgan, and other magicians, to establish a center for learning, where all may come and share. Tully will give you the documents with my instructions, explaining in detail my design. But for now I can only ask: Will you accept this charge? Will you build an academy for the study of magic and other knowledge?"

Pug nodded, tears in his eyes. Kulgan stood agape, not trusting what he had heard. His fondest wish, his life's ambition, shared with the duke in the idle hours of speaking of dreams over cups of wine, was now granted.

Borric began to cough again, then when the fit passed, said, "I hold title to an island, in the heart of the Great Star Lake, near Shamata. When this war is at last done, go there and build your academy. Perhaps someday it will be the greatest center for learning in the Kingdom." again the Duke was racked by coughing, the sound more terrible than before. He gasped after the attack, barely able to talk. He motioned for Lyam to come close, pointed to Pug, and said, "Tell him," then fell back upon his pillows.

Lyam swallowed hard, fighting back the tears, and spoke to Pug. "When you were taken by the Tsurani, Father wished for some memorial in remembrance. He considered what would be proper, for you had shown bravery on three occasions, twice saving Kulgan's life in addition to my sister's. He judged the only thing you lacked was a name, for none knew your parentage. So he ordered a document drawn up and sent to the Royal Archives, inscribing your name on the rolls of the family conDoin, adopting you into our house." Lyam forced a smile. "I only wish times were gladder to share such news with you."

Overcome with emotion, Pug sank to his knees at the Duke's side. He took the Duke's hand and kissed his signet, unable to speak. Softly Borric said, "I could be no more proud of you than were you my own son." He gasped for breath. "Bear our name with honor."

Pug squeezed the once powerful hand, now weak and limp. Borric's eyes began to close, and he struggled for breath. Pug released his hand, and the Duke motioned for all to come closer. Even old Brucal was red-eyed as they waited for the Duke's life to slip away.

To Brucal he whispered, "You are witness, old companion."

The Duke of Yabon raised an eyebrow and looked questioningly toward Kulgan. "What does he mean?"

Kulgan said, "He wishes you to witness his dying declaration. It is his right."

Borric looked at Kulgan and said, "Care for all my sons, old friend. Let the truth be known."

Lyam said to Kulgan, "Why does he say 'all my sons'? What truth?"

Kulgan stared at Borric, who nodded weakly. The magician's words came quietly. "Your father acknowledges his eldest son, Martin."

Lyam's eyes grew wide. "Martin?"

Borric's arm shot out in a sudden surge of strength, catching at Lyam's sleeve. He pulled Lyam to him and whispered, "Martin is your brother. I have wronged him, Lyam. He is a good man, and well do I love him." To Brucal he croaked a single word, "Witness!"

Brucal nodded. With tears streaming down into his white moustache, he swore, "So do I, Brucal, Duke of Yabon, bear witness."

Suddenly Borric's eyes went blank. His death rattle sounded deep in his chest, and he lay still.

Lyam fell to his knees and wept, and the others also let their grief come unrestrained. Never to Pug had a moment been so bittersweet.

ThAT Night it was a quiet group in the tent that Meecham had commandeered for Pug and his family. The news of Borric's death had cast a pall over the camp, and much of Kulgan's joy at seeing his apprentice returned safely had been blunted. The day slowly passed, with everyone becoming reacquainted, though they spoke softly and felt little joy.

Occasionally one would leave the tent, wandering off to be alone with his thoughts for a while. Nine years of history had been exchanged slowly, and now Pug spoke of his flight from the Empire.

Katala kept one eye on William, who lay curled up on a bed with one arm thrown over Fantus. The firedrake and the boy had taken one look at each other and decided they were friends. Meecham sat by the cook fire, watching the others carefully. Laurie and Kasumi sat on the floor, Tsurani fashion, while Pug finished his narrative.

Kasumi was the first to speak. "Great One, how is it that you could leave the Empire now, and not before?"

Kulgan raised one eyebrow. He was still absorbing the

changes in his

former apprentice. This talk of Greater Path and Lesser Path was still difficult to understand, and he couldn't believe the Tsurani attitude toward the boy. He amended that, the young man.

"After my confrontation with the Warlord, it became clear to me that I would serve the Empire by leaving, for my continued presence could only bring divisiveness at a time the Empire needs to heal itself. The war must be ended, and peace established, for the Empire is being drained."

"Aye," added Meecham, "as is the Kingdom. Nine years of war are bleeding us dry."

Kasumi was equally discomforted by the casual tone these people took toward Pug. "Great One, what if the Emperor cannot stop the new Warlord? The council will surely be quick to elect one."

"I don't know, Kasumi. I will then have to try to close the rift."

Kulgan pulled long on his pipe, then blew a thick cloud. "I am still not clear on everything you have said, Pug. From what you have said, I can see nothing that will prevent them from opening another rift."

"There is nothing, except that rifts are unstable things. There is no way to control where a rift will go, it was mere chance that caused the

one between this world and Kelewan. Once that one was established, others could follow, as if the path between the two worlds acted to other rifts like a lodestone to metal.

"The Tsurani could attempt to reestablish the rift, but each attempt would probably take them to other, new worlds. If they returned here, it would be by the merest chance, one in thousands. If the rift is closed, it would be years before they returned, if ever."

"From what you said about the Warlord's taking his own life," said Kulgan, "can we expect a respite in the fighting?"

It was Kasumi who answered. "I fear not, friend Kulgan, for I know this Warlord's Subcommander. He is Minwanabi, a proud family from a powerful clan, and it would serve his cause well when the High Council meets for his clan to bring word of a great victory. Most likely he will attack in force within days."

Kulgan shook his head. "Meecham, you had best ask Lord Lyam to join us, he must hear this." The tall franklin rose and left the tent.

Kasumi frowned. "I have come to know this world a little, and I agree with the Great One. Peace would surely profit us both, but I do not see it coming."

The young Duke followed Meecham into the tent a few minutes later, and Kasumi repeated his warning. "We had best be ready, then, for the attack," said Lyam.

Kasumi looked uncomfortable. "Lord, I must beg your pardon, but should fighting come, I cannot stand against my own people. May I have your permission to return to my own lines?"

The Duke considered this, and Pug noticed that his face was becoming lined with the strain of command. Gone were the laughing eyes and ever present smile. Now he resembled his father more than ever. "I understand. I will order you passed through the lines, if I have your parole that you will repeat nothing you have heard here."

Kasumi agreed and rose to leave. Pug stood also and said, "I will issue one last order to you, Kasumi, as a magician of Tsuranuanni. Return to your father, for he has need of you. One more soldier dying will aid your nation little."

Kasumi bowed his head. "Your will, Great One."

Kasumi embraced Laurie and left with Lyam.

Kulgan said, "You have told me so much that is difficult to absorb. I think for now we had best retire, for I feel the need of resting."

As the old magician rose, Pug said to him, "There is one thing I have been waiting to ask. What of Tomas?"

"Your childhood friend is well and with the elves of Elvandar. He is a warrior of great renown, as he had wished to be."

Pug smiled. "I am glad to hear that. Thank you."

Kulgan, Laurie, and Meecham bade them good night and left. Katala said, "Husband, you are tired. Come rest."

Pug crossed over to the bed she sat upon. "You amaze me. You have been through so much tonight, and yet you fret about me."

She took his hand. "When I am with you, everything is as it should be. But you look as if the weight of the world sits upon you."

"The weight of two worlds, I fear, love."



THEY WERE AWAKENED by the sound of trumpets. As they rose from the bed, Pug and Katala were startled by Laurie rushing into the tent. From the light behind him as he tossed aside the tent flap, it was evident that they had slept late. "The King comes!" He held out some clothing to Pug. "Put these on."

Seeing the wisdom of not walking the camp in the black robe, Pug complied. Katala pulled her robe on over her head, while Laurie turned his back. She went over to William, who was sitting up in his bed, looking frightened. He quickly calmed down and started to pull on Fantus's tail, causing the drake to snort a protest over such indignities. Pug and Laurie left the tent and walked to the commander's pavilion, overlooking the camp of the Kingdom armies. Away to the southeastern end of the camp they could see the royal party quickly approaching, and could hear the cheers of the soldiers as they saw the royal banner pass. Thousands of soldiers took up the cheer, for they had never seen the King before, and his presence served to lift their spirits, badly sagging since the rout by the Tsurani.

Laurie and Pug stood off to one side of the command tent, but close enough to ensure they could hear what transpired. Duke Brucal kept his eyes on the King, but Lyam noticed the two and nodded his approval of their presence.

The two lines of Royal Household Guard rode up to the front of the tent, then parted so the King might ride to the fore. Rodric, King of the Realm, rode on a huge black war-horse, who pawed at the ground as he came to a halt before the two dukes. Rodric was dressed in a gaudy array of gold-trimmed battle armor, with many flutings and reliefs fashioned into the breastplate. His helm was golden, with a circlet crown. A royal purple plume flew from the crest, blown by the morning wind. When he had been sitting for a moment, he removed his helm and handed it to a page. He stayed atop his horse and studied the two commanders, looking down at them with a crooked smile. "What, have you no greeting for your liege lord?"

The dukes bowed. Brucal said, "Your Majesty. We were just surprised. We had no word."

Rodric laughed, and the sound was tinged with madness. "That is because I sent no word. I wanted to surprise you." He looked at Lyam. "Who is this in the tabard of Crydee?"

"Lyam, Your Majesty," answered Brucal. "The Duke of Crydee."

The King shouted, "He is Duke only if I say he is Duke." With a sudden change of mood, he said, in solicitous tones, "I am sorry to hear of your father's death." He then giggled. "But he was a traitor, you know. I was going to hang him." Lyam tensed at Rodric's words, and Brucal gripped his arm.

The King saw and screamed, "You would attack your King? Traitor! You are one with your father and the others. Guards, seize him!" He pointed at the young man.

Royal guards dismounted, and the soldiers of the West who stood nearby moved to stop them. "Stop!" commanded Brucal, and the western soldiers stopped. He turned to Lyam. "On your word, we have civil war," he hissed.

Lyam said, "I submit, Your Majesty." The western soldiers grumbled. The King said coldly, "I shall have to hang you, you know. Take him to his tent and keep him there." The guards complied. The King turned his attention to Brucal. "Are you loyal to me, my lord Brucal, or shall there be a new Duke in Yabon as well as Crydee?"

"I am ever loyal to the crown, Your Majesty," came the answer.

The King dismounted. "Yes, I believe that." He giggled again. "You knew my father thought highly of you, didn't you?" He took the Duke's arm, and they entered the command tent.

Laurie touched Pug's shoulder and said, "We had best stay in our tents. If one of those courtiers recognizes me, I may join the Duke on the gibbet."

Pug nodded. "Get Kulgan and Meecham, and have them meet us in my tent "

Laurie hurried off, and Pug returned to his tent. Katala was feeding William from a bowl of stew from the night before. "I fear we have found another pot of trouble, love," Pug said. "The King is in camp, and he is madder than I dreamed possible. We must leave soon, for he has ordered Lyam imprisoned."

Katala looked shocked. "Where will we go?"

"I can manage to take us to Crydee, to Prince Arutha. I know the court of Castle Crydee as well as if there were a pattern there. I should have no trouble transporting us."

Laurie, Meecham, and Kulgan joined them a few minutes later, and Pug outlined his plan for escape. Kulgan shook his head. "You take the boy and Katala, Pug, but I must stay."

Meecham added, "And I."

Pug looked incredulous. "Why?"

"I served Lyam's father, and now I serve him. If the King tries to execute Lyam, there will be fighting. The Armies of the West will not stand idly by and watch Lyam hanged. The King has only the Royal Guard, and they will be easily defeated. Once that happens, it is civil war. Bas-Tyra will lead the Armies of the East. Lyam will need my aid."

Meecham said, "The issue won't be quickly decided. The Armies of the West are veteran, but they're tired. There's little spirit left in them. The Armies of the East are fresh, and Black Guy is the best general in the Kingdom. Lyam's unproved. It'll be a long struggle."

Pug understood what they were saying. "It may not reach that point, though. Brucal seems ready to follow Lyam's lead, but if he changes his mind? Who knows if Ylith, Tyr-Sog, and the others will follow Lyam without Yabon's lead?"

Kulgan sighed. "Brucal will not waver. He hates Bas-Tyra as much as Borric did, though for less personal reasons. He sees Guy's hand in every move to break the West. I think the Duke of Yabon would happily take Rodric's head, but even so, Lyam may submit rather than risk a civil war and lose the West to the Tsurani. We shall have to see what passes.

"Which is all the more reason you must go to Crydee, Pug. If Lyam dies, then Arutha is heir to the crown. Once begun, the King cannot stop the killing until Arutha is dead. Even Martin-whose claim would be blemished by his illegitimacy-and Carline would be hunted down

and killed. Perhaps Anita as well. Rodric would not risk a western heir to the throne. Upon Lyam's death, the bloodletting will not end until either Rodric or Arutha sits the throne of the Kingdom uncontested. You are the most powerful magician in the Kingdom." Pug started to protest. "I know enough of the arts to know your skills from the events you related to us. And I remember your promise as a boy. You are capable of feats unmatched by any in our world. Arutha will have grave need of your aid, for he would not let his brother's death go unpunished. Crydee, Carse, and Tulan will march once the Tsurani have been dealt with. Others, especially Brucal, would join them. Then we would have civil war."

Meecham spat out of the tent. He froze, holding aside the tent flap for a moment, then said, "I think the argument is over. Look."

They joined him at the opening. None had the franklin's sharp eyesight, and at first they couldn't see what he was pointing out. Then slowly they recognized the cloud of dust hanging in the air, far to the southeast. It spread across the horizon for miles, a dirty brown ribbon that ran below the blue of the sky.

The franklin turned to look at the others. "The Armies of the East."

THEy stood near the command pavilion, among a group of LaMutian soldiers. With Laurie, Kulgan, Pug, and Meecham was Earl Vandros of LaMut, the former cavalry officer who had commanded the raid through the valley years ago, when they had first seen the rift. He had gained the title upon his father's death, less than a year after Pug's capture, and had proven to be one of the Kingdom's most able field commanders.

A company of nobles was riding up the hill toward the pavilion. The king and Brucal stood waiting for them. Next to each lord rode a standard-bearer, who held the banner of that noble. Vandros announced the name of each army represented. "Rodez, Timons, Sadara, Ran, Cibon, they're all here." He turned to Kulgan. "I doubt there are a thousand soldiers left between here and Rillanon." .

Laurie said, "There is one whose banner I don't see. Bas-Tyra."

Vandros looked. "Salador, Deep Taunton, Pointer's Head . . . no, you are right. The golden eagle on black is not among the standards."

Meecham said, "Black Guy is no fool. He is already upon the throne of Krondor. Should Lyam be hanged, and Rodric fall in battle, it would be only a short step to the throne in Rillanon."

Vandros looked back at the gathering nobles. "Nearly the entire Congress of Lords is present. Should they return to Krondor without the King, then Guy would be King in short order. Many of these are his men."

Pug said, "Who is that under the banner of Salador? It is not Lord Kerus."

Vandros spat upon the ground. "It is Richard, formerly Baron of Dolth, now Duke of Salador. The King hung Kerus, and his family fled to Kesh. Now Richard rules the third most powerful duchy in the East. He is one of Guy's favorites."

When the nobles were assembled before the King, Richard of Salador, a red-faced bear of a man, said, "My liege, we are assembled.

Where are we to camp?"

"Camp? We make no camp, my lord Duke. We ride!" He turned to Lord Brucal. "Marshal the Armies of the West, Brucal." The Duke gave the signal, and heralds ran through the camp, shouting the order to muster. The battle drums and war trumpets were shortly sounding throughout the western camp.

Vandros left to join his soldiers, and soon there were few observers nearby. Kulgan, Pug, and the others moved off to one side, keeping clear of the King's gaze.

The King said to the assembled nobles, "We have had nine years of the western commander's tender ways. I shall lead the attack that will drive the foe from out of our lands." He turned to Brucal. "In deference to your advancing years, my lord Duke, I am giving command of the infantry to Duke Richard. You will stay here."

The old Duke of Yabon, who was in the process of donning his armor, looked stung. He said nothing save, "Your Majesty," his tone cold and strained. He stiffly turned and entered the command tent.

The King's horse was brought, and Rodric mounted. A page handed up his crowned helm, and the King placed it upon his head.

"The infantry shall follow as quickly as possible. Now we ride!"

The King spurred his horse down the hill, followed by the royal Guard and the assembled nobles. When he was out of sight, Kulgan turned to the others and said, "Now~ we wait."

The DAY GREW long.

Every hour that passed was like a slowly unfolding day. They sat in Pug's tent, wondering what was occurring to the west. The army had marched forward, under the King's banner, with drums and trumpets sounding. Over ten thousand horsemen and twenty thousand foot soldiers had advanced upon the Tsurani. There were only a few soldiers left in camp, the wounded and an orderly company. The quiet outside was unnerving after the almost constant camp noise of the previous day.

William had grown restless, and Katala had taken him outside to play. Fantus welcomed the opportunity to rest untroubled by his tireless playmate.

Kulgan sat quietly, puffing on his pipe. He and Pug passed the time by occasionally speaking of matters magical, but mostly were silent.

Laurie was the first to break the tension. He stood and said, "I can't take this waiting anymore. I think we should go to Lord Lyam and help decide what is to be done once the King returns."

Kulgan waved him back into his seat. "Lyam will do nothing, for he is his father's son and would not start a civil war, not here."

Pug sat absently toying with a dagger. "With the Armies of the East in camp, Lyam knows that an outbreak of fighting would hand the West to the Tsurani and crown to Bas-Tyra. He'll walk to the gibbet and put the rope around his own neck rather than see that."

"It's the worst kind of foolishness," countered Laurie.

"No," answered Kulgan, "not foolishness, minstrel, but a matter of honor. Lyam, like his father before him, believes that the nobility have a

responsibility to give their lives' work, and their lives if need be, for the Kingdom. With Borric and Erland dead, Lyam is next in line for the throne. But the succession is unclear, for Rodric has not named an heir. Lyam could not bear to wear the crown if he would be thought a usurper. Arutha is another matter, for he would simply do what was expedient, take the throne-though he would not wish to-and worry about what was said of him when it was said."

Pug nodded. "I think that Kulgan has the right of things. I do not know the brothers as well as he, but I think it might have been a better thing had the order of their birthing been reversed. Lyam would make a good king, but Arutha would make a great one. Men would follow Lyam to their deaths, but the younger brother would use his shrewdness to keep them alive."

"A fair assessment," conceded Kulgan. "If there is anyone who could find a way out of this mess, it is Arutha. He has his father's courage, but he also has a mind as quick as Bas-Tyra's. He could weather the intrigues of court, though he hates them." Kulgan smiled. "When they were boys, we called Arutha the 'little storm cloud,' for when he got angry, he would turn to black looks and rumbles, while Lyam would be quick to anger, quick to fight, and quick to forget."

Kulgan's reminiscences were interrupted by the sound of shouting from outside. They jumped up and rushed out of the tent.

A blood-covered rider, in the tabard of LaMut, sped past them, and they ran to follow. They reached the command tent as Lord Brucal came out. The old Duke of Yabon said, "What news?"

"The Earl Vandros sends word. Victory!" Other riders could be heard approaching the camp. "We rode through them like the wind. The line: on their east is breached, and the salient is rent. We broke them, isolating those in the salient, then wheeled to the west and rolled back those who sought to aid them. The infantry now holds fast, and the cavalry ' drives the Tsurani back into the North Pass. They flee in confusion! The day is ours.

A wineskin was handed to the rider, who sounded as if his voice "" would fail. He tilted it over his face and let the wine pour into his mouth. It ran down his chin, joining the deeper red splattered over ' his tabard. He threw aside the wineskin. "There is more. Richard of Salador has fallen, as has the Earl of Silden. And the King has been wounded." Concern showed on Brucal's face. "How does he fare?"

"Badly, I fear," said the rider, holding his nervous horse as it pranced around. "It is a grievous wound. His helm was cleaved by a broadsword, after his horse was killed beneath him. A hundred died to protect him, for his royal tabard was a beacon to the Tsurani. He comes now." ' The rider pointed back the way he had come.

Pug and the others turned to see a troop of riders approaching. In the van rode a royal guardsman with the King held before him. The monarch's face was covered in blood, and he held to the saddle horn with his right hand, his other arm dangling limply at his side. They stopped : before the tent, and soldiers helped the King from the horse. They started to carry him inside, but he said, in a weak and slurred voice, "No. Do not take me from the sun. Bring a chair so I may sit."

Nobles were riding up even as a chair was placed for the King. He was

lowered into it and leaned back, his head lolling to the left. His face was covered with blood, and white bone could be seen showing through a scalp wound.

Kulgan moved to Rodric's side. "My King, may I attend?"

The King struggled to see who was speaking. His eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment, then became clear. "Who is speaking? The magician? Yes, Borric's magician. Please, I am in pain." ' "

Kulgan closed his eyes, willing his powers to ease the King's suffering. He placed his hand upon Rodric's shoulder, and those nearby could see the ruler of the Kingdom visibly relax. "Thank you, magician. I feel more at ease." Rodric struggled to turn his head slightly. "My lord Brucal, please bring Lyam to me."

Lyam was in his tent, under guard, and a soldier was sent to bring him out. Moments later the young man knelt before his cousin. "My liege, your wound?" .

Kulgan was joined by a Priest of Dala, who agreed with his assessment of the wound. He looked at Brucal and shook his head slowly. Herbs and bandages were brought, and the King was cared for. Kulgan left the priest to his ministrations and returned to stand where the others looked on. Katala had joined them, holding William in her arms. Kulgan said, "I fear it is a mortal wound. The skull is broken, and fluids seep through the crack."

In silence they watched. The priest stood to one side and began praying for Rodric. All the nobles, save those commanding the infantry, were now arrayed before the King. More horsemen could be heard riding into camp. They joined the others who stood watching and were told what had happened. A hush fell over the assembly as the King spoke. "Lyam," he said in a faint voice. "I have been ill, haven't I?" Lyam said nothing, his face betraying conflicting emotions. He had little love for his cousin, but he was still the King.

Rodric ventured a weak smile. One side of his face moved only slightly, as if he could not control the muscles well. Rodric reached out with his good right hand, and Lyam took it. "I do not know what I have been thinking of late. So much of what has happened seems like a dream, dark and frightening. I have been trapped within that dream, but now I am free of it." Sweat appeared upon his brow, and his face was nearly white. "A demon has been driven from me, Lyam, and I can see much of what I have done was wrong, even evil."

Lyam knelt before his King. "No, my King, not evil."

The King coughed violently, then gasped as the attack subsided.

"Lyam, my time grows short." His voice rose a little, and he said, "Brucal, bear witness." The old Duke looked on, his face an implacable mask. He stepped over next to Lyam and said, "I am here, Your Majesty."

The King gripped Lyam's hand, pulling himself a little more upright.

His voice rose as he said, "We, Rodric, fourth of that name, hereditary ruler of the Kingdom of the Isles, do hereby proclaim that Lyam conDoin, our blood cousin, is of the royal blood. As oldest conDoin male, he is named Heir to the throne of our Kingdom."

Lyam shot Brucal an alarmed look, but the old Duke gave him a curt shake of his head, commanding silence. Lyam bowed his head, and his

sorrow was heartfelt. He tightly gripped the King's hand. Brucal said, "So do I, Brucal, Duke of Yabon, bear witness."

Rodric's voice sounded faint. "Lyam, one boon do I ask. Your cousin Guy has done what he has done at my command. I grieve for the madness that drove me to have Erland deposed. I knew his going to the dungeon was his death warrant, and I did nothing to halt it. Have mercy on Guy. He is an ambitious man, but not an evil one."

The King then spoke of his plans for the Kingdom, asking that they be continued, though with more regard for the populace. He spoke of many other things: of his boyhood, and his sorrow that he had never married. After a time his speech became too slurred to understand, and his head fell forward upon his chest.

Brucal ordered guards to attend the King. They gently raised him and carried him inside. Brucal and Lyam entered the tent, while the other nobles waited outside. More new arrivals were gathering, and they were told the news. Nearly a third of the Armies of the Kingdom stood before the commander's pavilion, a sea of upturned faces extending down the hill. Each stood without speaking, waiting out the death watch.

Brucal closed the tent flap behind and shut out the red glow of the sunset. The priest of Dala examined the King, then looked at the two Dukes. "He will not regain consciousness, my lords. It is only a matter of time."

Brucal took Lyam by the arm and led him to one side. In a hushed whisper he said, "You must say nothing when I proclaim you Heir, Lyam."

Lyam pulled his arm from Brucal's grasp, fixing his gaze upon the old warrior. "You bore witness, Brucal," he whispered back. "You heard my father acknowledge Martin as my brother, legitimizing him. He is the oldest conDoin male. Rodric's proclamation of succession is invalid. It presumed I was the oldest!"

Brucal spoke quietly, but his words were ungentle. "You have a war to end, Lyam. Then, if you should accomplish that small feat, you have to take your father and Rodric back to Rillanon, to bury them in the tomb of your ancestors. From the day Rodric is interned, there will be twelve days of mourning, then on noon of the thirteenth, all the claimants for the crown will present themselves before the Priests of Ishop, and the entire bloody damn Congress of Lords. Between now and then you'll have plenty of time to decide what to do. But for now, your needs must be Heir. There is no other way. "Have you forgotten Bas-Tyra? Should you dither, he'll

be in Rillanon with his army a month before you. Then you'll have bitter civil war, boy. As soon as you agree to keep your mouth shut, I'm ordering my own trusted troops to Krondor, under royal seal, to arrest Black Guy. They'll toss Bas-Tyra into the dungeon before his own men can stop them-there'll be enough loyal Krondorians around to ensure that. You can

have him held until you reach Krondor, then cart him off to Rillanon for the coronation, either your own or Martin's. But you must act, or by the gods, we'll have Guy's lackeys brewing civil war within a day of your naming Martin the true Heir. Do you understand?"

Lyam nodded silently. With a sigh he said, "But will Guy's men let him be taken?"

"Even the captain of his own guard will not stand against a royal warrant, especially countersigned by the representatives of the Congress of Lords. I shall guarantee signatures on the warrant," he said, clenching his gloved fist before his face.

Lyam was quiet for some time, then said, "You are right. I have no wish to visit trouble upon the Kingdom. I will do as you say."

The two men returned to the King's side and waited. Nearly another two hours passed before the priest listened at the King's chest and said, "The King is dead."

Brucal and Lyam joined the priest in a silent prayer for Rodric. Then the Duke of Yabon took a ring from Rodric's hand and turned to Lyam. "Come, it is time."

He held aside the tent flap, and Lyam looked out. The sun had set, and the night sky glittered with stars. Fires had been lit and torches brought, so that now the multitude appeared to be an ocean of firelight. Not one man in twenty had left, though they were all tired and hungry after the victory.

Brucal and Lyam appeared before the tent, and the old Duke said, "The King is dead." His face was stony, but his eyes were red-rimmed. Lyam looked pale but stood erect, his head high.

Brucal held something above his head. A glint of deep red fire reflected off the small object as it caught the torchlight. The nobles who stood close nodded in understanding, for it was the royal signet, worn by all the conDoin kings since Delong the Great had crossed the water from Rillanon to plant the banner of the Kingdom of the Isles upon the mainland shore.

Brucal took Lyam's hand and placed the ring upon his finger. Lyam studied the old and worn ring, with its device cut into the ruby, still undimmed by age. As he raised his eyes to behold the crowd, a noble stepped forward. It was the Duke of Rodez, and he knelt before Lyam. "Your Highness," he said. One by one the others before the tent, nobles of both East and West, knelt in homage, and like a wave rippling, all those assembled knelt, until Lyam alone was standing.

Lyam looked at those before him, overcome with emotion and unable to speak. He placed his hand upon Brucal's shoulder and motioned for them all to stand.

Suddenly the multitude was upon its feet, and the cheer went up, "Hail, Lyam! Long live the Heir!" The soldiers of the Kingdom roared their approval, doubly so, for many knew that hours ago the threat of civil war had hung over their heads. Men of both East and West embraced and celebrated, for a terrible future had been avoided.

Lyam raised his hands, and soon all were silent. His voice rang out over their heads, and all could hear him say, "Let no man rejoice this night. Let the drums be muffled and the trumpets blown low, for tonight we mourn a King."



BRUCAL POINTED at the map. "The salient is surrounded, and each attempt to break through to the main body has been turned back. We have isolated nearly four thousand of their soldiers there." It was late night. Rodric had been buried with what honor could be afforded in the camp.

There had been none of the trappings common to a royal funeral, but the business of war made it necessary. He had been quickly embalmed and buried in his armor next to Borric, on a hillside overlooking the camp. When the war was over, they would be returned to the tombs of their ancestors in Rillanon.

Now the young Heir looked over the map, gauging the situation in light of the latest communique from the front. The Tsurani held in the North Pass, at the entrance to the valley. The infantry had dug in before them, bottling up those in the valley, and isolating both the forces along the river Crydee and what was left of the salient.

"We have broken their offensive," said Lyam, "but it is a two-edged sword. We cannot attempt to fight on two fronts. We must also be ready should the Tsurani try to move against us from the south. I see no quick ending yet, in spite of our gains."

Brucal said, "But surely those in the salient will surrender soon. They are cut off, with little food or water, and cannot expect to be resupplied. In a matter of days they will be starving."

Pug interrupted. "Forgive me, Lord Brucal, but they will not."

"What can they gain by resisting? Their position is hopeless."

"They tie up your forces that would otherwise be attacking the camp. Soon the situation in Tsuranuanni will be resolved enough for magicians to return from the Assembly. Then food and water can be transported in without interference. And each day they hold strengthens the Tsurani as reinforcements arrive from Kelewan. They are Tsurani and will gladly die rather than be taken captive."

Lyam asked, "Are they so honor bound to die, then?"

"Yes. On Kelewan they know only that captives become slaves. The idea of a prisoner exchange is unknown to them."

"Then we must bring all our weight to bear upon the salient at once," said Brucal. "We must crush them and free our soldiers to deal with other threats."

"It will prove costly," Lyam observed. "This time there will be no element of surprise, and they are dug in like moles. We could lose two men for each of theirs."

Kulgan had been sitting off to one side with Laurie and Meecham.

"It is a tragedy that we have gained only a broadening of the fighting. And so soon after the Emperor's offer of peace."

Pug said, "Perhaps it is still not too late."

Lyam looked at Pug. "What do you mean? Kasumi must have already sent word that the peace was refused."

"Yes, but there may still be time to send word that there will be a new king who is willing to talk peace."

"Who will carry the message?" asked Kulgan. "Your life might be forfeit if you return to the Empire."

"We may be able to solve two problems at once. Your Highness, may I have your leave to promise the Tsurani in the salient safe passage to their lines?"

Lyam considered this. "I will, if I have their parole not to return for a year's time."

"I will go to them, then," said Pug. "Perhaps we can still end this war in spite of the calamities that have befallen us."

The Tsurani GUARDS, nervous and alert, tensed at the sound of an approaching rider. "They come!" one shouted, and men seized weapons and hurried to the barricades. The southern earthworks were still intact, but here at the western edge of the former salient the pickets had thrown up a hasty barrier of felled trees and shallow trenches. Bowmen stood ready, arrows notched, but the expected charge did not come. A single figure on horseback came into view. His hands were raised overhead, palms together in the sign for parley. And more, he wore the black robe.

The rider walked his horse to the edge of the barricade and asked, in perfect Tsurani, "Who commands here?"

A startled officer said, "Commander Wataun."

The rider snapped, "You forget your manners, Strike Leader." He took note of the colors and devices on the man's breastplate and helm.

"Are the Chilapaningo so lacking in civility?"

The officer came to attention. "Your pardon, Great One," the man stammered. "It is only that you were unexpected."

"Bring Commander Wataun here."

"Your will, Great One."

The commander of the Tsurani salient came a short time later. He was a bandy-legged, brawny-chested old fighter, and Great One or not, his first concern was for the welfare of his troops. He looked at the magician suspiciously. "I am here, Great One."

"I have come to order you and your soldiers back to the valley."

Commander Wataun smiled ruefully and shook his head. "I regret, Great One, that I may not. Word of your exploits has been carried to us here, and that the Assembly has called your status into question. You may be no longer outside the law by now. If you had not come under a sign of parley, I would have you taken, though it would cost us dearly."

Pug felt a hot flush come to his cheeks. He had known it was likely the Assembly would cast him out, but to hear this still caused him pain. Ruefully, he knew that because of the training he had undergone, he would still feel a sense of loyalty to that alien place and would never fully feel at home in his native land.

With a sigh Pug said, "What then will you do?"

The Force Commander shrugged. "Hold our position. Die if we must."

"Then I will make you an offer, Commander. You must decide if it is a trick or not. Kasumi of the Shinzawai carried an offer from the Light of Heaven to the Midkemian King. It was an offer of peace. The King rejected it, but now there is to be a new king who is willing to make peace. I would ask you to carry word to the Holy city, to the Emperor, that Prince Lyam will accept peace. Will you do so?"

The commander considered. "If what you say is true, then I would be

a fool to waste my men. What guarantees are you willing to make?"

"I give you my word, as a Great One-if that means anything still that what I say is true. I also promise that your men will be given safe conduct back to the valley, on promise they return to the Empire for a year's time. And I will ride to the valley entrance, to your lines, as hostage. Is that enough?"

The commander thought it over for a moment as he surveyed his tired, thirsty troops. "I will agree, Great One. If it is the Light of Heaven's will that the war end, who am I to prolong it?"

"The Oaxatucan have long been known for their bravery. Let it be said they are also worthy of honor for their wisdom."

The commander bowed, then turned to his soldiers. "Pass the word. We march . . . home."

Word that the emperor would agree to peace reached the camp four days later. Pug had given a message to Wataun to be carried through the rift. It bore the black seal of the Assembly, and no one would impede its swift delivery. It had been addressed to Fumita asking him to

carry word to the Holy City that the new King of the Realm would not require retribution but would accept peace.

Lyam had shown visible emotion when Pug had read the message. The Emperor himself would come through the rift in a month's time and would sign formal treaties with the Kingdom. Pug had felt close to tears when he read the news, which soon spread through the camp that the war was over. A great cheering could be heard.

Pug and Kulgan sat in the older magician's tent. For the first time in years they had been feeling something like their old relationship. Pug was finishing up a long explanation of the Tsurani system of instructing novices.

"Pug," said Kulgan around a long pull on his pipe. "It seems that now the war is over, we can return to the business of magicians. Only now it is you who are master, and I who would be student."

"There is much we may learn from each other, Kulgan. But I fear old habits die hard. I don't think I could ever get used to the idea of your being a student. And there are many things you are capable of that I still cannot do."

Kulgan seemed surprised. "Really? I would have thought my simple arts beneath your greatness."

Pug felt the old embarrassment from when he had been Kulgan's student. "You make sport of me yet."

Kulgan laughed. "Only a little, boy. And you are still a boy to one of my advancing years. It is not easy for me to see an indifferent apprentice become the most powerful magician of another world."

"Indifferent was the proper word for it. At first I only wanted to be a soldier. I think you knew that. Then when I had finally decided to devote myself to study, the invasion began." Pug smiled. "I think you . . . felt sorry for me that day when I stood alone before the Duke's court, the only boy not called."

"That is partly true, though I was the first to sense the power in you. And the judgment was borne out, no matter the amazing events required to bring your ability to fruition."

Pug sighed. "Well, the Assembly is nothing if not complete in its training. Once the power is detected, there are but two options, success or death. With all other thoughts banished, there is little to concern the student but the study of magic. Without that, I doubt I would ever have amounted to much."

Kulgan said, "I think not. Had the Tsurani never come, there would still have been a path to greatness for you to follow."

They sat and talked and were comforted by each other's presence. After a while they lit fires, for darkness was falling. Katala came to the tent to see if her husband was to join her and the boy at the celebration feast being given by King Lyam. She looked inside and saw the two of them lost in conversation.

She backed out and, with a faint smile on her lips, returned to her son.

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## dECEPtIONS

### ToMAS AWOKE WITH A START.

In the predawn darkness something strange called to him. He sat up, every sense extended, trying to recapture what had awakened him. Aglaranna stirred next to him. Since his return from the confrontation with Martin over the Tsurani prisoners, he had been free of the alien dreams and the blind rages. He was no longer the boy from Crydee or the ancient Dragon Lord, but a new being possessing qualities of both.

She came awake and slowly reached out to touch his shoulder. The muscles were relaxed, free of the tension that marked his grappling with an ancient dream. She breathed a long sigh, then said, "Tomas, what is it?"

He reached up to cover her hand with his own. "I don't know. Something odd occurred a moment ago." He sat with his head slightly turned, as if listening to something distant. "A change . . . a shift in the pattern of things, perhaps."

The Elf queen said nothing. Since becoming his lover she had grown used to his uncanny ability to sense events elsewhere, an ability unmatched by even the most gifted of the ancient Spellweavers. A remnant of his Valheru heritage, this awareness had come fully into bloom since he recovered his humanity. She thought it strange, yet reassuring, that his Valheru powers had become more pronounced and acute only since regaining his humanity. It was as if some force had conspired to keep them blunted until he possessed the wisdom to use them.

Tomas stopped listening. "It is something to the east, a mixture of rejoicing and a great sadness." His voice sounded thick with emotion. "An age is dying."

He rolled off the sleeping pallet and stood, powerful muscles revealed

to Aglaranna's elven eyes in the dim light. He stood at the door of their sleeping chamber, looking out over Elvandar, listening to the sounds of the night. Everything appeared calm.

The scent of the forest, thick, sweet, and heady, was overlaid with the faint hints of aromas from last night's supper, and the smell of bread fresh from the oven for this morning's meal. Night birds sang, while day birds began their predawn warbling, and the sun prepared to rise in the east. The touch of cool air upon his naked skin was a caress to Tomas, and he felt more complete and at peace than he had ever been in his young life.

Aglaranna's arms went around his waist, and he felt her press tight against him. He could feel the beat of her heart as she held him close.

"My lord, my love," she said, "return to our bed."

He turned within the circle of her arms and felt the warmth of her body against his. "There is something . . ." He gripped her close, but gently. "There is a feeling of hope."

She could feel his heat as his desire answered hers. "Hope. Would that it is true."

He looked down at her face, his senses as acute in the gloom as hers, drinking in the sight of her. "Never lose hope, my queen."

He kissed her deeply, and whatever awakened him was quickly forgotten

LYAM SAT QUIETLY in his tent. He was composing the message he would send to Crydee when a guard entered and announced the arrival of Pug and Kulgan. Lyam rose and greeted them, and when the guards left, indicated they should sit. "I am sorely in need of your wisdom." He sat back and waved at the parchments before him. "If Arutha is to reach us in time for the peace conference, these must leave today. But I have never been much for letters, and I also confess to great difficulty sharing the events of the last week."

Kulgan said, "May I?" pointing to the letter.

Lyam waved consent, and the magician picked up the parchment and began to read. "'To my beloved brother and sister: It is with the deepest sorrow I must tell you of our father's death. He was injured mortally in the great Tsurani offensive, leading a counterattack to rescue surrounded soldiers, mainly Hadati hillmen, auxiliaries to the garrison of Yabon. The Hadati sing his name and make sagas in his honor, such was his bravery. He passed thinking of his children, and his love for us all was undiminished.

"The King has also passed, and it has fallen to me to lead our armies. Arutha, I would have you here, for we now are at the war's end. The Emperor is willing to make peace. We shall meet in the north valley of the Grey Towers in twenty-nine days' time, at noon. Carline, I would have you take ship to Krondor with Anita, for there is much to be done there, and Princess Alicia will have need of her daughter. I will join you with Arutha once peace has been made. With love, and sharing in your sorrow, I am, your most loving brother, Lyam."

Kulgan was quiet for a moment, and Lyam said, "I thought you might be able to add something or other, to lend elegance to it."

Kulgan said, "I think you announced your father's passing with simplicity

and gentleness. It is a fine message."

Lyam shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "There is so much yet to write. I have said nothing about Martin."

Kulgan took up a quill. "I will copy this again, for your pen is a bit strangled, Lyam." With a warm smile he added, "You were always one to prefer the sword to the quill. I'll add some instructions to the end, asking that Martin go to Krondor with your sister. Gardan and Fannon should also make the journey. And an honor company of the castle garrison. It will make it seem you mean to honor those who served so well in Crydee. Then you will have ample time to decide how to tell Martin what you must."

Pug shook his head sadly. "I only wish you could add Roland's name to that list." Since coming to the camp, he had learned of the Squire of Tulan's death. Kulgan had told him of what he knew of events in Crydee and elsewhere concerning his old friends over the last few years. Lyam said, "Curse me for a fool! Carline has no idea you are back, Pug. You must add that, Kulgan."

Pug said, "I hope it will not come as too much of a shock."

Kulgan chuckled. "Not so much of a shock as discovering you've a wife and child."

Memories of his boyhood and his tempestuous relationship with the Princess returned, and Pug said, "I hope also she has outgrown some of the notions she held nine years ago."

Lyam laughed for the first time since his father's death, genuinely entertained by Pug's discomfort. "Rest assured, Pug. I've had many long communications with my brother and sister over the years, and I judge Carline a greatly changed young woman from the girl you once knew. She was fifteen years old when last you saw her. Think of your own changes in the last nine years."

Pug nodded.

Kulgan finished his copy work and handed the document to Lyam.

He read it and said, "Thank you, Kulgan. You've added just the right note of gentleness."

The tent flap opened and Brucal entered, his old, lined face animated with glee. "Bas-Tyra's fled!"

"How?" asked Lyam. "Our soldiers must still be a week from Krondor, maybe more."

The old Duke sat heavily in a chair. "We found a hidden cage of messenger pigeons, belonging to the late Richard of Salador. One of his men sent word to Guy of Rodric's death, and your being named Heir. We've questioned the fellow, a valet of Richard's. He's admitted to being one of Bas-Tyra's spies in Richard's court. Guy's fled the city, knowing one of your first acts as King will be to have him hung. My guess is he will make straight for Rillanon."

"I would have thought that would be the last place on Midkemia he would wish to be," remarked Kulgan.

"Black Guy is no man's fool, whatever else may be said of him. He'll be underground, no doubt, but you'll see his handiwork again before we are through. Until the crown is resting upon Lyam's head, Guy is still a power in the Kingdom."

Lyam looked troubled at the last remark, thinking of his father's

dying declaration. Since Bruical's admonition to say nothing of Martin, everyone had spoken only of Lyam's coronation, nothing of Martin's possible claim to the crown.

Lyam let these disturbing thoughts pass by as Bruical continued speaking: "Still, with Bas-Tyra on the sly, most of our troubles are now behind. And with the war near an end, we can get back to the business of rebuilding the Kingdom. And I for one am glad. I am getting too old for much more of this nonsense of war and politics. I only regret I am without a son, so I could announce in his favor and retire."

Lyam studied Bruical with affectionate disbelief. "You'll never bow down gracefully, old war dog. You'll go to your deathbed scratching and clawing every inch of the way, and that day is years off."

"Who's talking of dying?" snorted Bruical. "I mean to hunt my hounds and fly my falcons, and do some fishing as well. Who knows? I may find some country wench hearty enough to keep up with me, say about seventeen or eighteen years of age, and remarry and father a son yet. If that young fool Vandros ever gathers his wits about him and marries my Felinah, you just see how fast he'll become Duke of Yabon when I retire.

"Why she still waits for him is anybody's guess." He heaved himself up from his chair. "I am for a hot bath and some sleep before supper. By your leave?"

Lyam motioned he might leave and, when he was gone, said, "I will never get used to this business of people needing my permission to come and go."

Pug and Kulgan rose from their chairs. Kulgan said, "You had better, for everyone will ask it of you from now on. With your permission "

Feigning disgust, Lyam motioned they might go.

THE COUNCIL SAT in assembly as Aglaranna took her place upon the throne. Besides the normal council, Martin Longbow was present, standing beside Tomas. When all were in place, Aglaranna said, "You have asked for council, Tathar. Now tell us what cause you bring before US.,

Tathar bowed slightly to the Queen. "We of the council felt it time for an understanding."

"Of what, Tathar?" asked the Elf queen.

' Tathar said, "We have labored long to bring a peaceful, secure ending to this business of Tomas. It is known by all here that our arts were turned to calming the rage within, softening the might of the Valheru, so the young man who was transformed would not be overwhelmed in the course of time."

He paused, and Martin leaned close to Tomas. "Trouble."

Tomas startled him with a slight smile and a wink. Once more Martin was reassured that the mirthful boy he had known in Crydee was as much present in this young man as the Dragon Lord. "Everything will be fine," said Tomas in a whisper.

"We have," said Tathar, "come to judge this business done, for Tomas is no longer to be feared as an Old One."

Aglaranna said, "That is happy news indeed. But is this then cause for a council?"

"No, lady. Something else must also be laid to rest. For while we no longer fear Tomas, still we will not place ourselves under his rule." .

Aglaranna stood, outrage clear upon her face. "Who dares to presume this? Has there been a single word from any to suggest that Tomas seeks to rule?"

Tathar stood firm before his Queen's displeasure. "My lady, you see with a lover's eyes." Before she could answer, he held up his hand. "Speak not sharp words with me, daughter of my oldest friend; I make no accusations. That he shares your bed is no one's concern save yourself. We begrudge you nothing. But he now has the means of a claim, and we would have the matter settled now."

Aglaranna paled, and Tomas stepped forward. "What means?" he said, his voice commanding.

Tathar looked slightly surprised. "She carries your child. Did you not know?"

Tomas was bereft of words. Conflicting feelings ran through him. A child! Yet he had not been told. He looked at Tathar. "How do you know?"

Tathar smiled, and there was no mockery in it. "I am old, Tomas. I can see the signs."

Tomas looked to Aglaranna. "It is true?"

She nodded. "I would not tell you until it was no longer possible to hide the truth."

He felt a stab of uncertainty. "Why?"

"To spare you any worry. Until the war is through, you must put your mind to nothing else. I would not burden you with other thoughts."

Tomas stood quietly for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed, a clear, joyous sound. "A child. Praise the gods!"

Tathar looked thoughtfully at Tomas. "Do you claim the throne?"

"Aye, I do, Tathar," Tomas said, a smile upon his face.

Calin spoke for the first time. "It is my inheritance, Tomas. You will have to contest with me for it."

Tomas smiled at Calin. "I will not cross swords with you, son of my beloved."

"If you seek to be King among us, then you must."

Tomas walked over to Calin. There had never been any affection between them, for more than the others, Calin had feared Tomas's potential threat to his people and now stood ready to fight if need be. Tomas placed his hand upon Calin's shoulder and looked deeply into his eyes. "You are Heir. I speak not of being your King." He stepped away and addressed the council. "I am what you see before you, a being of two heritages. I possess the power of the Valheru, though I was not born to it, and my mind remembers ages long gone to dust. But I can remember a boy's memories and can again feel the joy in laughter and a lover's touch." He looked at the Elf Queen. "I claim only the right to sit beside my queen, with your blessings, as her consort. I will take only what rule she and you give, nothing more. Should you give none, still I will remain at her side." Then, with firmness, he added, "But I will not stand down from this: our child shall have a heritage unblemished by a



sinister birth."

There was a general murmur of approval, and Tomas faced Aglaranna. "If you will take me as husband?" he said in the ancient elven language. Aglaranna sat with eyes gleaming. She looked to Tathar. "I will. Is there any who denies me the right?"

Tathar looked around at the other councillors. Seeing no dissension, Tathar said, "It is permitted, my lady."

Abruptly there was a shout of approval from the gathered elves, and soon others were coming to investigate the unusual display of activity in the council. They in turn joined in the celebration, for all knew of the Queen's love for the warrior in white and gold, and they judged him a fit consort.

Calin said, "You are wise in our ways, Tomas. Had you done otherwise, there would have been strife, or lingering doubt. I thank you for your prudence."

Tomas took his hand in a firm grip. "It is only just, Calin. Your claim is without question. When your Queen and I have journeyed to the Blessed Isles, then our child will be your loyal subject."

Aglaranna came to Tomas's side, and Martin joined them, to say, "Joy in all things." Tomas embraced his friend, as did the Queen.

Calin shouted for silence. When the noise had died, he said, "It is time for clear speaking. Let all know that what has been fact for years is now openly acknowledged. Tomas is Warleader of Elvandar, and Prince Consort to the Queen. His words are to be obeyed by all save the Queen. I, Calin, have spoken."

"And I, too, say this is true," echoed Tathar. Then the council bowed before the Queen and her husband-to-be.

Martin said, "It is well I shall leave Elvandar as happiness returns."

Aglaranna said, "You are leaving?"

"I fear I must. There is still a war, and I am still Huntmaster of Crydee. Besides," he said with a grin, "I fear young Garret is growing overly content to rest and partake of your largess. I must harry him along the trail before he gets fat."

"You'll stay for the wedding?" asked Tomas.

As Martin began to apologize, Aglaranna said, "The ceremony can be tomorrow."

Martin conceded. "One more day? I will be pleased.

Another shout went up, and Tomas could see Dolgan pushing through the crowd. When the dwarf chief stood before them, he said, "We were not invited to the council, but when we heard the shouts, we came." Behind him Tomas and Aglaranna could see the other dwarves approaching.

Tomas placed his hand upon Dolgan's shoulder. "Old companion, you are welcome. You have come to a celebration. There is to be a wedding."

Dolgan fixed them both with a knowing smile. "Aye, and high time."

THE RIDER SPURRED his horse past the lines of Tsurani soldiers. He was still discomforted by the sight of so many of them passing to the east, and the recent enemy watched him ride by with guarded expressions as he

headed toward Elvandar.

Laurie pulled in his horse near a large outcropping of rock where a Tsurani officer in black-and-orange armor supervised the passing soldiers. From his officer's plume and insignia, he was a Force Leader, surrounded by his cadre of Strike Leaders and Patrol Leaders. To the Force Leader he said, "Where lies the closest ford across the river?" The other officers regarded Laurie with suspicion, but if the Force Leader felt any surprise at the barbarian's nearly perfect Tsurani, he did not show it. He inclined his head back the way his men marched from and said, "A short way from here. Less than an hour's march. Faster on your beast, I'm sure. It is marked by two large trees on either side of a clearing, above a place where the river falls a short way."

Laurie had no difficulty identifying the house colors the man wore, as it was one of the Five Great Families, and said, "Thank you, Force Leader. Honor to your house, son of the Minwanabi."

The Force Leader stood erect. He did not know who this rider was, but he was courteous, and that courtesy must be returned. "Honor to your house, stranger."

Laurie rode forward past the dispirited Tsurani soldiers plodding along the banks of the river. He found the clearing above the small falls and rode into the water. The river ran swiftly here, but the horse managed to cross without incident. Laurie could feel the spray from the falls as the wind blew it back in his direction. It felt cool and refreshing after the hot ride. He had been in the saddle since before daybreak and would not finish his ride until after night had fallen. By then he would be close enough to Elvandar to be intercepted by elven sentries. They would certainly be watching the Tsurani withdrawal with interest, and one could guide him to their queen.

Laurie had volunteered to carry the message, for it was felt that the messenger would be less likely to encounter trouble if he spoke Tsurani. He had been challenged three times during his ride, and each time he had explained his way past suspicious Tsurani officers. There might be a truce, but there was little trust yet.

When he was clear of the river, Laurie dismounted, for his horse was tired. He walked the animal to cool it off. He pulled the saddle from the mount's back and was rubbing him down with a brush carried in his saddlebags when a figure stepped out from among the trees. Laurie was startled, for the figure was not an elf. He was a dark-haired man with grey at the temples, dressed in a brown robe, and holding a staff. He approached the minstrel, without hurry and seemingly at ease. He stopped a few feet away and leaned on his staff. "Well met, Laurie of Tyr-Sog."

The man possessed a strange manner, and Laurie did not remember having met him before. "Do I know you?"

"No, but I have knowledge of you, troubadour."

Laurie edged closer to his saddle, where his sword lay. The man smiled and waved his hand in the air. Abruptly Laurie was filled with calm, and he stopped moving for his sword. Whoever this man was, he was obviously harmless, he thought.

"What brings you to the elven forest, Laurie?"

Without knowing why, Laurie answered. "I bring messages to the Elf

queen."

"What are you to say?"

"That Lyam is now Heir, and peace has been restored. He invites the elves and the dwarves to the valley in three weeks' time, for there will they seal the peace."

The man nodded. "I see. I am on my way to see the elf Queen. I will carry word. You must have better things you can do with your time."

Laurie started to protest, but stopped. Why should he travel to Elvandar when this man was bound there anyway? It was a waste of time.

Laurie nodded. The man chuckled. "Why don't you rest here for the night? The sound of water is soothing, and there is little chance of rain\_.

Tomorrow return to the Prince and tell him that you carried the message to Elvandar. You spoke with the Queen and Tomas, and they were agreed to the Prince's wishes. The dwarves of Stone Mountain will hear also. Then tell Lyam that the elves and the dwarves will come. He may rest assured, they will come."

Laurie nodded. What the man was saying made a great deal of sense.

The stranger turned to leave, then said, "By the way, I think you'dbest not mention our meeting."

Laurie said nothing, but accepted what the stranger said without question. After the man was gone, he felt a great sense of relief that he was on his way back from Elvandar and that his message had been received.

The CEREMONY TOOK place in a quiet glade, with Aglaranna and Tomas exchanging vows before Tathar. No one else was there, as was the elven way, while they pledged their love. Tathar invoked the blessings of the gods and instructed them on their duty, one to the other.

When the ceremony was complete, Tathar said, "Now return to Elvandar, for it is time for feasting and celebration. You have brought joy to your people, my queen and my Prince."

They rose from their kneeling positions and embraced. Tomas stepped back and said, "I would have this day remembered, beloved."

He turned and cupped his hands around his mouth. In the ancient language of the elves he cried, "Belegroch! Belegroch! Attend us." The

sound of hooves pounding the earth could be heard. Then a small band of white horses raced into the glade, ran toward them, and reared in salute to the Elf Queen and her consort. Tomas leaped upon the back of one. The elf steed stood quietly, and Tathar said, "By no other way could you have shown so well that you are now one with US.,

Aglaranna and Tathar mounted, and they rode back to Elvandar.

When they came into sight of the tree-city, a great shout went up from the assembled elves. The sight of the queen and her Prince Consort riding the elf steeds was, as Tathar said, a confirmation of Tomas's place in Elvandar.

The feasting went on for hours, and Tomas observed that the joy he felt was shared by everyone. Aglaranna sat next to him, for a second throne had been placed in the council hall, acknowledging Tomas's rank. Every elf who was not keeping watch over the outworlders came to stand before them, pledging loyalty and offering blessings on the union.

The dwarves also offered their congratulations and joined in the festivities wholeheartedly, filling the glades of Elvandar with their boisterous singing.

Long into the night the celebration wore on. Suddenly Tomas stiffened.

A chilled wind seemed to pass through him. Aglaranna gripped his arm, sensing something amiss. "Husband, what is it?"

Tomas stared into space. "Something . . . strange . . . like the other night: hopeful, but sad."

Abruptly there was a shout from the edge of the clearing below Elvandar.

It cut through the sound of the celebration, but what was being said was unclear. Tomas rose, with Aglaranna at his side, and crossed to the edge of the huge platform. Looking down, he could see an elven scout below, clearly out of breath. "What is afoot?" Tomas shouted.

"My lord," came the reply, "the outworlders-they withdraw."

Tomas was rooted in place. Those simple words struck him like a blow. His mind couldn't comprehend the Tsurani's leaving after all these years of fighting. He shook off the feeling. "To what ends? Do they marshal?"

The scout shook his head. "No, my lord, they are not staging. They move slowly, without alarm. Their soldiers look dispirited. They break camp along every mile of the Crydee and turn east." The guard's upturned face showed an expression of stunned but joyful understanding.

He looked at those nearby, then with a smile said simply, "They are leaving."

A shout of incredible joy went up, and many openly wept, for it seemed that at last the war was ended. Tomas turned and saw tears on the face of his wife. She embraced him, and they stood quietly for a moment. After a time the new Prince Consort of Elvandar said to Calin, who stood nearby, "Send runners to follow, for it may be a trick."

Aglaranna said, "Do you truly think so, Tomas?"

He shook his head. "I only wish to make sure, but something inside tells me this is truly the end. It was the hope of peace with the sadness of defeat mingled together that I felt."

She touched his cheek, and he said, "I will send runners to the Kingdom camp and inquire of Lord Borric what is happening."

She said, "If it is peace, he will send word."

Tomas looked at her. "True. We shall wait, then." He studied her face, centuries old, but still filled with the beauty of a woman in her first bloom. "This day will doubly be remembered as a day to celebrate."

Neither Tomas nor Aglaranna was surprised when Macros arrived in Elvandar, for they had ceased being amazed at the sorcerer after his first visit. Without ceremony he stepped forward from the trees surrounding the clearing and crossed toward the tree-city.

The entire court was assembled, including Longbow, when Macros came to stand before the Queen and Tomas. He bowed and said, "Greetings, lady, and to your consort."

"Welcome, Macros the Black," said the Queen. "Have you come to unravel the mystery of the outworlders' withdrawal?"

Macros leaned upon his staff and nodded. "I bring news." He seemed to consider his words carefully. "You should know that both the King

and the Lord of Crydee are dead. Lyam is now Heir."

Tomas noticed Martin. The Huntmaster's face was drained of blood. His features remained impassive, but it was clear to Tomas that Martin was rocked by the news. Tomas turned toward Macros. "I knew not the King, but the Duke was a fine man. I am sorry for such news."

Macros went over to Martin. Martin watched the sorcerer, for while he had never met him, he knew him by reputation, having been told by Arutha of the meeting upon his island and by Tomas of his intervention during the Tsurani invasion of Elvandar. "You, Martin Longbow, are to go at once to Crydee. There you will sail with the Princesses Carline and Anita for Krondor." Martin was about to speak when Macros raised his hand, those of the court paused as if taking a breath. In a near-whisper Macros said, "At the last, your father spoke your name in love." Then his hand dropped, and all was as it had been.

Martin felt no alarm, but rather a sense of comfort from the sorcerer's words; he knew no one else had been aware of the brief remark. Macros said, "Now hear more glad tidings. The war is over. Lyam and Ichindar meet in twenty days' time to sign a peace treaty."

A cheer went up in the court, and those above shouted the news to those below. Soon all of the elven forests echoed with the sound of rejoicing. Dolgan again entered the council, wiping his eyes. "What's this? Another celebration without us while I nap? You'll make me think we're no longer welcome."

Tomas laughed. "Nothing of the kind, Dolgan. Fetch your brethren and have them join our celebration. The war is over."

Dolgan took out his pipe and knocked the dottle from it, kicking the burned-out tabac over the edge of the platform. "Finally," he said as he opened his pouch. He turned away, as if intent upon filling his pipe, and Tomas pretended not to notice the wetness upon the dwarven chief's face.

ARUTHA SAT upon his father's throne, alone in the great hall. He held the message from his brother, which he had read several times, trying to understand that their father was truly gone. Grief sat heavy upon him. Carline had taken the news well. She had gone to the quiet garden beside the keep, to be alone with her thoughts.

Thoughts ran riot through Arutha's mind. He remembered the time his father had taken him hunting, then another time when he came back from hunting with Martin Longbow and how proudly he had listened to his father exclaim over the large buck he had taken. He vaguely recalled the ache when he had learned of his mother's death, but it was a distant thing, dulled by time. The image of his father enraged in the King's palace suddenly came to him, and Arutha let out a slow sigh. "At least," he said to himself, "most of what you had wished has come to pass, Father. Rodric is gone and Guy is in disgrace." "Arutha?" said a voice from the other side of the hall.

Arutha looked up: stepping from the shadows of the doorway came Anita, her satin-slipped feet making no sound as she crossed the stone floor of the hall.

Lost in his thoughts, he hadn't noticed her enter. She carried a small lamp, for evening had cast the hall into deep gloom. "The pages were

reluctant to disturb you, but I couldn't see you sitting alone in the darkness," she said. Arutha felt pleasure at the sight of her and relief she had come. A young woman of uncommon sense and tender ways, Anita was the first person Arutha had known to see beneath his surface calm and dry humor. More than those who had known him since boyhood, she understood his moods and could lighten them, knowing the right words to comfort him. Without waiting for him to answer, she said, "I have heard the news, Arutha. I am so terribly sorry."

Arutha smiled at her. "Not yet over your own grief at your father's passing, and you share mine. You are kind."

Word of Erland's death had come a week before on a ship from Krondor. Anita shook her head, her soft red hair moving in a rippling wave around her face. "Father was very ill for many years. He prepared us well for his death. It was a near-certainty when he was put into the dungeon. I knew that when we left Krondor."

"Still, you show strength. I hope I am able to bear up as well. There is so much to be done."

She spoke quietly. "I think you will rule wisely, Lyam in Rillanon, you in Krondor."

"I? In Krondor? I've avoided thinking about that."

She sat at his side, taking the throne Carline sat in when at her father's side in court. She reached over and placed her hand upon Arutha's, resting on the arm of the throne. "You must. After Lyam, you are Heir to the crown. The Prince of Krondor is the Heir's office. There is no one to rule there but you."

Arutha looked uncomfortable. "Anita, I have always assumed I would someday become Earl of some minor keep, or perhaps seek a career as an officer in one of the Border Barons' armies. But I had never thought ' to rule. I am not sure I welcome being Duke of Grydee, let alone Prince of Krondor. Besides, Lyam will marry, I am sure-he always caught the girls' eyes, and as King he'll certainly have his pick. When he has a son, the boy can be Prince of Krondor."

Anita shook her head firmly. "No, Arutha. There is too much work to be done now. The Western Realm needs a strong hand, your hand. Another Viceroy is not likely to win trust, for each lord will suspect any other who is named. It must be you."

Arutha studied the young woman. In the five months she had been at Crydee, he had come to care dearly for her, though he had been unable to express his feelings, finding words lacking when they were together. She was each day more a beautiful woman, less a girl. She was still young, which made him uncomfortable. With the war in progress, he had kept his thoughts away from their respective fathers' plans for a possible marriage, revealed to him that night aboard the Sea Swift. Now, with peace at hand, Arutha was suddenly confronted with that question.

"Anita, what you say is possibly true, but you also have a claim to the throne. Didn't you say your father's plan for our marriage was designed to bolster your claim to Krondor?"

She looked at him with large green eyes. "That was a plan to foil Guy's ambitions. It was to strengthen your father's or brother's claim to the crown should Rodric die heirless. Now you need not feel bound to

those plans."

"Should I take Krondor, what will you do?"

"Mother and I have other estates. We can live quite well upon the revenues, I am sure."

Struggling with emotions within himself, Arutha spoke slowly. "I have not had time to weigh this in my mind. When I was last in Krondor, I learned how little I know of cities, and I know less than that of governing.

"You were raised for such undertakings. . . . I was only a second son. My education is lacking."

"There are many able men, here and in Krondor, who will advise you. You have a good head for things, Arutha, the ability to see what must be done, and the courage to act. You will do well as Prince of Krondor." She rose and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "There is time for you to decide how best to serve your brother, Arutha. Try not to let this new responsibility weigh too heavily upon you."

"I will try. Still, I would feel better knowing you were close by-you and your mother," he added with a rush.

She smiled warmly. "We will be close at hand should you have need of our advice, Arutha. We will likely stay upon our estate in the hills near Krondor, just a few hours' ride from the palace. Krondor is the only home I've known, and Mother has lived nowhere else since she was a girl. Should you wish to see us, you have but to command, and we will happily come to court. And should you wish to find respite from the burdens of office, you will be a welcome guest."

Arutha smiled at the girl. "I suspect I will be visiting with regularity, and I hope I do not wear out my welcome."

"Never, Arutha."

ToMAs sTOOD ALONE on the platform, watching the stars through the branches above. His elven senses informed him someone had come up behind. With a nod he greeted the sorcerer. "I am but twenty-five years in this life, Macros, though I bear memories of ages. All my adult life I have been waging war. It seems a dream."

"Let us not turn this dream into a nightmare."

Tomas studied the sorcerer. "What do you mean?"

Macros said nothing for a time, and Tomas awaited his words with patience. At last the sorcerer spoke. "There is this thing which must be done, Tomas, and it has fallen to you to finish this war."

"I like little the tone of your words. I thought you said the war was finished."

"On the day of the meeting between Lyam and the Emperor, you must marshal the elves and dwarves to the west of the field. When the monarchs meet in the center of the field, then will there be treachery."

"What treachery?" Tomas's face showed his anger.

"I may say little more, save that when Ichindar and Lyam are seated, you must attack the Tsurani with all your forces. Only this way can Midkemia be saved from utter destruction."

A look of suspicion crossed Tomas's face. "You ask much for one unwilling to give more."

Macros stood tall, holding his staff to one side, like a ruler his scepter.

His dark eyes narrowed, and his brows met over his hooked nose. His voice stayed soft, but his words were hot with anger. Even Tomas felt something akin to awe in his presence.

"More!" he said, biting off the word. "I gave you all, Valheru! You are here by dint of my actions over many years. More of my life than you will know has been given to preparing for your coming. Had I not bested, then befriended Rhuagh, you would never have survived in the mines of Mac Mordain Cadal. It was I who prepared the armor and sword of Ashen-Shugar, leaving them with the Hammer of Tholin and my gift to the dragon, so that centuries later you would discover them. It was I who set your feet upon the path, Tomas. Had I not come to aid you, years past, Elvandar would now be ashes. Do you think Tathar and the other Spellweavers of Elvandar were the only ones to work on your behalf? Without my aid over these last nine years, you would have been destroyed utterly by the dragon's gifts. No mere human could have withstood such ancient and powerful magic without the intervention only I could make. When you were swept along upon your dream quests to the past, it was I who guided you back to the present, I who returned you to sanity." The sorcerer's voice rose. "It was I who gave you the power to influence Ashen-Shugar! You were my tool!" Tomas stepped back before the controlled fury of the sorcerer's words. "No, Tomas, I have not given you much. I have given you everything!"

For the first time since donning the armor in Mac Mordain Cadal, Tomas felt fear. In the most basic fiber of his being he suddenly was aware of how much power the sorcerer possessed, and that should Macros choose, he could brush him aside like a nettlesome insect.

"Who are you?" he asked quietly, controlled fear in his voice.

Macros's anger vanished. He leaned once again upon his staff, and Tomas's fears fled and with them all memory of his fears. With a chuckle, Macros said, "I tend to forget myself upon occasion. My apologies."

Then he grew serious once again. "I do not ask this thing from any demand of gratitude. What I have done is done, and you owe me nothing. But know this: both the creature called Ashen-Shugar and the boy called Tomas shared an abiding love of this world, each in his own way, incomprehensible to each other as that love was. You possess both aspects of the love of land: the desire of the Valheru to protect and control, and the desire of the keep boy to nurture and nourish. But should you fail in this task I set before you, should you stint in resolve when the moment is nigh, then know with dread certainty, this world upon which we stand shall be lost, lost beyond recalling. This on my most holy oath is the truth."

"Then I shall do as you instruct."

Macros smiled. "Go then to your wife, Prince Consort of Elvandar, but when it is time, marshal your army. I go to Stone Mountain, for Harthorn and his soldiers will join you. Every sword and war hammer is needed."

"Will they know you?"

Macros gazed at Tomas. "Indeed they will know me, Tomas of Elvandar, never doubt."

"I shall gather all the might of Elvandar, Macros." A grim note entered his voice. "And for all time, we will put an end to this war."



Macros waved his staff and vanished. Tomas waited alone for a time, struggling with a newfound fear, that this war would last forever.

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## BEtrAYAL

The armies stood facing one another

Seasoned veterans eyed each other across the open valley floor, not quite ready to feel at ease in the presence of an enemy they had fought for nine years and longer. Each side was composed of honor companies, representing the nobles of the Kingdom and clans of the Empire. Each numbered in excess of a thousand men. The last of the Tsurani invasion army was now entering the rift, returning home to Kelewan, leaving only the Emperor's honor detachment behind. The Kingdom army was still camped at the mouths of the two passes into the valley and would not leave the area until the treaty was finalized. There was still a cautious aspect to the newfound trust.

On the Kingdom side of the valley, Lyam sat astride a white warhorse, awaiting the Emperor's arrival. Nearby the nobles of the Kingdom, their armor cleaned and polished, sat their horses. With them were the leaders of the Free Cities militia and a detachment of Natalese Rangers.

Trumpets sounded from across the field, and the Emperor's party could be seen emerging from the rift. Imperial banners fluttered in the breeze as the procession moved to the head of the Tsurani contingent. Awaiting the Tsurani herald, who was walking across the several hundred yards that separated the opposing monarchs, Prince Lyam turned to regard those who sat on horseback nearby. Pug, Kulgan, Meecham, and Laurie were accorded their position of honor by dint of their service to the Kingdom. Earl Vandros and several other officers who had distinguished themselves were also close by. Next to Lyam sat Arutha, astride a chestnut war-horse, who pranced in place out of high spirits. Pug looked around, feeling a giddy sensation at the sight of all the symbols of two mighty nations with whose fates he had been so closely tied. Across the open field he could see the banners of the powerful families of the Empire, all familiar to him: the Keda, the Oaxatucan, the Minwanabi, and the rest. Behind him were the fluttering banners of the Kingdom, all the duchies from Crydee in the west to Ran in the east.

Kulgan noticed his former student's far-off gaze and tapped him on the shoulder with the long staff he was holding. "Are you all right?" Pug turned. "I'm fine. I was just a little overwhelmed for a moment, engulfed in memories. It seems strange to see this day, in a way. Both sides of the war were bitter enemies, and yet I have ties with both lands. I find I have feelings I've yet to explore." Kulgan smiled. "There will be much time for introspection later. Perhaps Tully and I can offer some aid." The old cleric had accompanied Arutha on his brutal ride, not wishing to miss the peace meeting.

The fourteen days in the saddle had taken a toll, however, and now he lay ill in Lyam's tent. It had taken a command from Lyam to keep him there, for he had been determined to accompany the royal party.

The Tsurani herald reached a place before Lyam. He bowed low, then said something in Tsurani. Pug rode forward to translate. "He says, 'His Most Imperial Majesty, Ichindar, ninety-one times Emperor, Light of Heaven, and ruler of all the nations of Tsuranuanni, sends greetings to his brother monarch, His most Royal Highness, Prince Lyam, ruler of the lands known as the Kingdom. Will the Prince accept his invitation to join with him at the center of the valley?'"

Lyam said, "Tell him that I return his greetings and will be pleased to meet with him at the appointed place." Pug translated, with the appropriate Tsurani formality, and the herald bowed low and returned to his own lines.

They could see the imperial litter being carried forward. Lyam signaled that his escort should accompany him, and they rode out to meet the Emperor in the center of the valley floor. Pug, Kulgan, and Laurie rode with the honor escort; Meecham waited with the soldiers.

The Kingdom horsemen reached the designated place first and waited while the imperial retinue approached. The litter was born on the backs of twenty slaves, chosen for their uniformity in height and appearance. Their thick muscles bunched under the strain of carrying the heavy, gold-encrusted litter. Gauzy white curtains hung from goldinlaid wooden supports, decorated with gems of great value and beauty. The rare metal and gems caught the sun's rays and glittered brightly. Behind the litter marched representatives of the most powerful families in the Empire, clan warchiefs. There were five of them, one for each family eligible to elect a new Warlord.

The litter was lowered, and Ichindar, Emperor of the nations of Tsuranuanni, stepped out. He was dressed in golden armor, its value immeasurable by Tsurani standards. Upon his head was a crested helm covered in the same metal. He walked over to Lyam, who had dismounted to meet him. Pug, who was to translate, dismounted and walked to stand to one side of the two rulers. The Emperor nodded curtly to him.

Lyam and Ichindar studied one another, and both seemed surprised at the other's youthfulness. Ichindar was only three years older than the new Heir.

Lyam began by welcoming the Emperor with friendship and the hope of peace. Ichindar responded in kind. Then the Light of Heaven stepped forward and extended his right hand. "I understand this is your custom?"

Lyam took the hand of the Emperor of Tsuranuanni. Suddenly the tension broke, and cheers went up from both sides of the valley. The two young monarchs were smiling, and the handshake was vigorous and firm.

Lyam said, "May this be the beginning of a lasting peace for our two nations."

Ichindar answered, "Peace is a new thing to Tsuranuanni, but I trust we will learn quickly. My High Council is divided over my actions. I hope the fruits of trade and the prosperity gained by learning from one

another will unify attitudes."

"That is my wish also," said Lyam. "To mark the truce, I have ordered a gift prepared for you." He signaled, and a soldier trotted out from the Kingdom lines, leading a beautiful black war-horse behind. A black saddle set with gold was upon its back, and from the saddle horn hung a broadsword, with a jeweled scabbard and hilt.

Ichindar regarded the horse with a little skepticism, but was awed by the workmanship of the sword. He hefted the great blade and said, "You honor me, Prince Lyam." '

Ichindar turned to one of his escorts, who ordered a chest carried forward. Two slaves set it before the Emperor. It was carved ngaggi wood, finished to a deep and beautiful shine. Scrollwork surrounded bas-relief carvings of Tsurani animals and plants. Each had been cleverly stained in lighter and darker tones, in nearly lifelike detail. In itself it was a fine gift, but when the lid was thrown back, a pile of the finest cut stones, all larger than a man's thumb, glistened in the sun.

The Emperor said, "I would have difficulty justifying reparation to the High Council, and my position with them is not the best at present, but a gift to mark the occasion they cannot fault. I hope this will repair some of the destruction my nation has caused."

Lyam bowed slightly. "You are generous and I thank you. Will you join me for refreshments?" The Emperor nodded, and Lyam gave a command for a pavilion to be erected. A dozen soldiers galloped for Mrard and dismounted. Several carried poles and bolts of material. In short order a large, open-sided pavilion was erected. Chairs and a table were set up under the covering. Other soldiers brought wine and food and placed them upon the table.

Pug pulled out a large cushioned chair for the Emperor, as Arutha did for his brother. The two rulers sat, and Ichindar said, "This is quite a bit more comfortable than my throne. I must have a cushion made."

Wine was poured, and Lyam and the Emperor toasted each other.

Then a toast to peace was offered. Everyone present drank it.

Ichindar turned to Pug. "Great One, it seems that this meeting will prove more salubrious to those around than our last."

Pug bowed. "I trust so, Your Imperial Majesty. I hope I am forgiven my disruption of the Imperial Games."

The Emperor frowned. "Disruption, It was closer to destruction."

Pug translated for the others while Ichindar smiled ruefully in appreciation.

"This Great One has done many innovative things in my Empire.

I fear we will not see the end of his handiwork long after his name is forgotten. Still, that is a thing of the past. Let us concern ourselves with the future."

The honored guests from both camps stood in the pavilion as the two monarchs began their discussion of the best way to establish relationships between the two worlds.

ToMas WATCHED the pavilion. Galin and Dolgan waited on either side. Behind them more than two thousand elves and dwarves stood ready. They had entered the valley through the North Pass, moving by the Kingdom forces that were gathered. ~They had circled around the clearing,

gathering in the woods to the west, where they were accorded a clear view of the proceeding.

Tomas said to both his comrades, "I see little to indicate trickery."

A second dwarf, Harthorn of Stone Mountain, walked over to them.

"Aye, elfling. All looks peaceful enough, in spite of the sorcerer's warning."

Abruptly there was a heat shimmer across the field, as if their vision swam and flickered; then Tomas and the others could see Tsurani soldiers drawing weapons.

Tomas turned to those behind and said, "Be ready!"

A KINGDOM SOLDIER rode up to the pavilion. The Tsurani lords looked at him with distrust, for so far the only soldiers who neared the pavilion were those serving refreshments.

"Your Highness!" he shouted. "Something strange is occurring."

"What?" said Lyam, disturbed at the man's excitement.

"From our position we can see figures moving through the woods to the west."

Lyam rose and saw figures near the edge of the trees. After a moment, while Pug translated the exchange for the Emperor, Lyam said, "That could be the dwarves and elves." He turned to Ichindar. "I sent word to the Elf Queen and the dwarven Warleaders of the peace. They must be now approaching."

The Emperor came over to Lyam and studied the woods. "Why are they remaining in the trees? Why do they stay hidden?"

Lyam turned to the horseman. "Ride and bid those in the trees join

Us.

The guard obeyed. When he was halfway to the woods, a shout went up from the trees, and green-clad elves and armored dwarves came running forward. Battle chants and cries filled the air. Ichindar looked at the onrushing figures in confusion. Several of his companions drew weapons. A soldier from the Tsurani lines dashed to the pavilion and cried, "Majesty, we are undone. It is a trap!"

: "Every Tsurani backed away, swords drawn. Ichindar shouted, "Is this .. how you treat for peace? Mouthing pledges while you plot treachery?"

Lyam didn't understand his words, but the tone made the meaning clear. He gripped Pug's arm and said, "Tell him I know nothing of this!"

Pug tried to raise his voice over the commotion in the pavilion, but

The Tsurani nobles were backing away, surrounding the Light of Heaven,

While soldiers were rushing forward from the Tsurani lines to join in protecting Ichindar.

Lyam shouted, "Back! Back to our own lines!" as the Tsurani soldiers approached. The Midkemians quickly mounted.

Pug heard Ichindar's voice carrying over the noise: "Treacherous one, you show your true nature. Never will Tsuranuanni deal with those without honor. We will grind your Kingdom into dust!"

Sounds of fighting erupted as the elves and dwarves clashed with the Tsurani soldiers. Lyam and the others raced back to their own soldiers, who sat waiting to join the fight. As Lyam reined up, Lord Brucal said,

"Shall we advance, Highness?"

Lyam shook his head. "I will not be a party to treachery."

He regarded the scene before him. The elves and dwarves were pushing the Tsurani back toward the rift machine. The Emperor and his guards were circling, avoiding the fighting, keeping the thousand honor guards between the attackers and themselves. Runners could be seen disappearing into the rift.

A moment later Tsurani soldiers erupted from the rift. They rushed forward to engage the attackers. The collapsing Tsurani line held, then started to push the elves and dwarves back.

Arutha moved his horse next to Lyam's. "Lyam! We must attack.

Soon the elves and the dwarves will be overwhelmed. There are ten thousand more Tsurani on the other side of that rift, only a step away. If you ever hope to end this bloody war, we must capture and hold that machine."

Pug forced his own horse to the other side of Lyam's mount. "Lyam!" he shouted. "You must do as Arutha says."

Doubt still held the young Heir. Pug raised his voice even louder.

"Understand this: for nine years you've faced only a part of the might within the Empire, only those soldiers belonging to the clans of the War Party. Until now you had many hidden allies, blocking a major effort against the Kingdom. But now this betrayal has inflamed the one man who can command unquestioned obedience from all the clans of the Empire. Ichindar can order every clan of Tsuranuanni to marshal!

"You've never faced more than thirty thousand warriors along all fronts. By tomorrow those thirty thousand can be back in this valley. In a week double again that number. Lyam, you have no idea how vast his powers are. Within a year he can send a million men and a thousand magicians against us! You must act!"

Lyam sat stiffly, the bitterness of the moment clearly showing in his expression. "Can you aid us?"

"I may, should you open a path for me to reach the machine, but I don't know if I have the ability to shut off the rift. Other powers I have, but even if I overcame my conditioning and could oppose the Empire and I killed every man on this field, it would avail little, for a greater host would still be but a step away."

Lyam gave a curt nod. Slowly he faced Arutha. "Send gallopers to the North and South passes. Call all the Armies of the Kingdom to arms." Arutha wheeled and shouted the order, and riders sped away toward both passes.

Lyam looked back toward Pug. "If you can help, do so, but not until the way is safe. You are the only master of your arts upon this world." Indicating Laurie, Meecham, and Kulgan, he said, "Keep them from the fighting as well, for they have no part in it. Stay back, and should we fail, use your arts to go to Krondor. Carline and Anita must be taken to the east, to their grand-uncle Caldric, for the West will surely be Tsurani." He drew his sword and gave the order to advance.

The thousand horsemen lumbered forward, a moving wall of steel gaining momentum as officers shouted orders, keeping the columns orderly. Then Lyam signaled the charge, and the lines became ragged as horsemen rushed across the clearing toward the Tsurani. The Tsurani

heard the rumbling of cavalry, and many fell back from the elves and dwarves to form a shield wall. Pug, Laurie, Meecham, and Kulgan watched while the Kingdom horsemen collided with it. Horses and men screamed as long spears bent and broke. The shield wall wavered as men died, but others leaped forward to take their places, and the Kingdom host was turned back. Lyam re-formed his troops and charged again, this time breaking through the shields.

Pug could see the right side of the Tsurani forces rolled back before the horsemen, but the Emperor himself rallied the balance of his soldiers, and the center of the line held. Even at this distance Pug could see the Tsurani nobles entreating the Emperor to flee.

THE EMPEROR STOOD with sword drawn, shouting orders. He refused to leave the field. He was forming his men into a tight circle protecting the rift machine, so others could return to this valley from Kelewan. He looked and saw that soldiers were now rushing forth from the rift in greater numbers. Soon there would be enough of them to destroy the King's small force.

A faint trembling could be felt beneath his feet, then one of the Tsurani lords pointed behind the Emperor. Ichindar saw hundreds of horsemen erupting from the trees to the north. The northern cavalry units were the first to answer Lyam's call. The Emperor directed newly arriving soldiers to the north line to meet the new threat.

A shout from the left caused him to turn. A tall warrior, clad in white and gold, was cutting a swath through the Tsurani guards, heading straight for the Light of Heaven. All the Tsurani lords rushed to cut him off. A clan Force Leader stood nearby. He raced to the Emperor and shouted, "Your Majesty, you must leave. We can hold only a short while. If you are lost, the Empire is without a heart, and the gods will turn their faces from us."

The Emperor tried to push past him, as the gold-and-white giant cut down another Tsurani lord. The officer said, "May heaven understand," and struck Ichindar across the back of the head with the flat of his sword. The Emperor crumpled to the ground, and the Force Leader shouted for soldiers to carry him through the rift. "The Emperor is overcome! Take him to safety!" Without question the soldiers picked up the supreme ruler and conveyed him to the machine.

A Strike Leader rushed to the Force Leader's side, shouting, "Sir, all our lords have been killed!" The Force Leader saw that the tall warrior was being forced back by the sheer number of Tsurani soldiers intercepting him, but not until after he had butchered every senior Warchief who had accompanied the Emperor. A quick glance informed the Force Leader the Emperor was near safety, as the guards carrying Ichindar disappeared from view at the far side of the rift. More soldiers came streaming through from the near side of the rift. Seeing no more time to waste, the Force Leader said, "I will act as Force Commander! You are acting Subcommander. More men to the north!" The man rushed off to place more men along the north line as the cavalry from the North Pass bore down in a mad gallop.

The attackers from the north hit the Tsurani position with a thunderous crash. The hastily erected shield wall wavered, but finally held. The

Force Commander looked about and prayed they could hold until sufficient reinforcements arrived.

PUG AND his three companions could see the northern elements of the Kingdom army hit the shield wall. Spears shattered and horses fell, while screaming men were trampled underfoot. The wall still held, and the Kingdom forces withdrew to re-form for another charge. Lyam's command was being pushed back, and he ordered a withdrawal, so that he could coordinate his attack with the one from the north. The elves and dwarves under Tomas were among the Tsurani, to the west, and were causing them the most difficulty, though they also were being slowly repulsed.

As the horsemen pulled back, the Tsurani's attention was turned to the elves and dwarves. Those behind the north and south shield positions left their posts to lend support to their comrades on the west flank.

Seeing this, Meecham observed, "If the elves don't withdraw, the Tsurani will overwhelm them." As if he had been heard, the four observers could see the western confrontation broken off. Elves and dwarves retreated under cover of elven bowmen.

Kulgan said to Pug, "This respite serves to strengthen the Tsurani." They could see the flood of Tsurani soldiers coming through the rift. "If Lyam does not reach the machine after the next charge, the Tsurani will gain in strength as we weaken."

Pug said, "He can bottle them up only if he can station bowmen at the entrance to the rift. A steady stream of bowfire through it should keep them back long enough to erect some sort of barrier. Then we might be able to render it inoperative."

Laurie said, "Can't it be destroyed? The other way is fraught with

risk.

Pug sat quietly for a moment. "I don't know if my powers are sufficient to destroy the rift. But I think it is time to try."

As he started to spur his horse, a voice behind rang out: "No!"

They all turned and saw a brown-clad figure standing, staff in hand, where no one had been a moment earlier. "Even your powers are not equal to the task, Great One."

"Macros!" Kulgan exclaimed.

Macros smiled a bitter smile. "As I foretold, I am here when the need is gratest, the hour most grave."

pug said, "What is to be done?"

"I will close the rift, but I have need of your aid." He returned his attention to Kulgan. "I see you still have the staff I gave you. Good. dismount."

Pug and Kulgan got down from their mounts. Pug had forgotten that Kulgan's ever present staff had been the one Macros had given him.

... Macros went over to stand before Kulgan. "Plant the end of the staff firmly in the ground." He turned and handed the staff he carried to

Pug. "This staff is twin to that one. Hold it tightly, and never for an instant release your hold, if you have any hope of surviving our task."

He regarded the conflict a short distance away. "It is almost the appointed

hour, but not quite. Listen carefully, for time grows short." He looked at Pug, then Kulgan. "When this is all over, if the rift is destroyed, then return to my island. There you will find explanations for everything that has occurred, though perhaps not to your full satisfaction." Again there was a bitter smile. "Kulgan, if you have any hope of seeing your former pupil again, hold to that staff with all the strength ~:you possess. Keep Pug in your mind, and never let the staff break contact with Midkemian soil. Is that understood?"

Kulgan said, "But what of yourself?"

Macros's tone was harsh. "My safety is my own concern. Trouble not yourself about me. My place in this drama was as foreordained as your own. Now watch."

They returned their attention to the battle. The northern elements of the Kingdom army charged, and Lyam and Tomas gave orders for their own units to join in the attack. The horsemen hit the shield walls again, and the Tsurani lines broke. For a moment the Kingdom cavalry was in command of the field, and the Tsurani collapsed inward. Then, as the advantage of the charge was offset by the milling swarm of foot soldiers who cut horses out from under riders, or conspired to pull horsemen to the ground, the balance returned. A sea of battling figures could be seen around the rift machine. There was no organization, and little discipline.

Men fought to survive, not for any gain in position. The sounds of metal clashing against hardened wood and hides rang through the valley.

Everywhere the onlookers turned their attention, blood flowed, and the sound of death was terrible.

Macros looked at Pug and said, "Now is the time. Walk with me."

Pug walked behind the brown-robed sorcerer. He held tightly to Macros's staff, for he believed the sorcerer's warning that it was his only hope of surviving what lay before them. They walked through the battle, as if some agent were protecting them. Several times a soldier turned to strike, only to be intercepted by one from the other side. Horses would be ready to trample them only to wheel away at the last instant. It was as if a path opened before them and closed behind.

They approached what was left of the Tsurani line. A shield holder fell to a horseman's lance. They stepped over the fallen body and entered the small, relatively calm circle around the rift. Soldiers were still pouring forth from the rift, and the circle was widening. Macros and Pug mounted the platform to the far side of the rift, while soldiers rushed out of the near side. The soldiers seemed oblivious to the two magicians.

Macros stepped into the void of the rift. Pug entered behind. Instead of the expected emergence into Kelewan, they hung in a colorless place. There was little sensation of direction. The place was without light, but not dark, only various shades of grey. Pug found himself alone, with only the sound of his heart beating in his ear to reassure him that existence had not ceased. Softly he said, "Macros?"

Macros's voice came to him: "Here, Pug."

"I cannot see you."

A chuckle was heard. "No, for there is no light. What you see is a faint illusion granted by my arts so you might have some point of reference here. Without ample preparation, even your vaunted powers



would avail you little in keeping your sanity, Pug. Simply accept that the human mind is poorly equipped to deal with this place."

"What is this place?"

"This is the place between. Here the gods struggled during the Chaos Wars, and here we shall do our work."

"Men are dying, Macros. We should hurry."

"Here there is no time, Pug. Relative to those who battle, we are frozen in an instant. We could grow old and die, and not a full second would pass upon the battlefield.

"But we must still be quickly about our task. Even I could not do this without spending a bit of energy to keep us alive, energy we'll need to finish this business. We dare not tarry long, but there are a few things I would say to you. I have waited a long while for you to fulfill your promise. I could not close the rift without your aid."

Pug spoke, though his senses rebelled at the grey landscape on all sides and the disembodied voice that seemed a short distance away from him. "It was you who turned the rift aside, when the Stranger came and the Enemy sought to redaim the nations of Tsuranuanni. Surely that took awesome power."

He could hear the sorcerer chuckle. "You remember that detail? Well, I was younger then." As if he knew it was an unsatisfactory answer, Macros added, "Then the rift was a wild thing, created by the wills of those who stood atop the towers of the Assembly. I only turned it to another place, balking the Enemy's design, and that at great risk. Now this rift is a controlled thing, firmly anchored in Kelewan, managed by a machine. That which controls it, many intricate spells, keeping it in harmony with Midkemia, keeps me from manipulating it. All I may do is end it, but for that I need help.

"Before we end this particular drama, I would say this to you: you will understand most things after you reach my island. But one thing above all I ask of you to bear in mind as you hear my message. Please remember I did what I did because it was my fate. I would ask you to think of me kindly."

While he could not see the sorcerer, Pug felt his presence close by. He started to speak, but was interrupted by Macros's voice. "When I am done, use whatever shred of energy you have left to will yourself to Kulgan. The staff will aid you, but you must bend all your effort~ to that task. If you fail, you will perish."

It was Macros's second warning, and Pug felt dread for the first time in years. "What of yourself?"

"Take care of yourself, Pug. I have other concerns."

There came a sensation of change, as if the fabric of nothingness around them was subtly altering. Macros said, "At my command, you must unleash the full fury of your power. All that you did at the Imperial Games was but a shadow of what you must do now."

"You know of that?"

Again there was a chuckle. "I was there, though my seat was poor compared to your own. I must admit it was quite impressive. Even I would have been hard-pressed to provide as spectacular a show. Now, there is no more time. Await my command, then let your power flow toward me."

Pug said nothing. He could feel the sorcerer's presence before him, as if it were being defined for him by Macros. Again he felt the sensation of twisting change around him. Suddenly there was a blinding light, then darkness. An instant later all around him erupted in mad displays of energy, much like those he witnessed in the rift of the Golden Bridge. On every side blinding colors exploded, primal forces he did not recognize.

"Now, Pug!" came Macros's cry.

Pug bent his will to the task. He reached down into the deepest recesses of his being. From there he brought forth all he could of the magic power he had gained from two worlds. Forces sufficient to destroy mountains, move rivers from their courses, and level cities to rubble, all these he focused. Then like casting away something painful to hold, he directed all this energy toward where he sensed the sorcerer to be. There came an unimaginable, insane explosion of those forces, and the primal matter of time and space screamed in protest at its presence. Pug could feel it writhe and twist around him, as if the fundamental universe were trying to cast the invaders out. Then there came a sudden release, and they were expelled.

Pug found himself floating in total blackness. He drifted, numb and without coherent thought. His mind was unable to accept what he had sensed, and he was close to losing consciousness. He felt his fingers go lax, and the staff began to slip from his hand. He clutched spasmodically at it from blind instinct. He then felt a faint tugging. His mind resisted the cool blackness that was trying to overtake him, and he tried to remember something. It was growing cold around him, and he could feel his lungs burning for lack of air. He tried to remember something once more, but it would not come to him. Then he felt the tug again, and a faint but familiar voice seemed to sound close by.

"Kulgan?" he said weakly, and let the darkness take him.

The Tsurani Force Commander was alive. He wondered at that miracle as he saw those around him who lay dead before the rift machine. The explosion a minute before had killed hundreds, and others lay dazed a little way beyond.

He rose and took stock of what was occurring. The terrible destruction of the rift had not served to aid the Kingdom forces, either. Riders frantically tried to control near-hysterical horses, and other mounts could be seen running madly away, their riders thrown from their backs. All about, confusion reigned. But those at the edge of the conflict were less dazed than the others, and the fighting was resuming.

There was little hope, now that Kelewan was cut off to them, either of aid or of a safe return. Still, they numbered only slightly less than the enemy, and there was a chance that the field could yet be theirs. There might be time to worry about the rift later.

Abruptly the sounds of fighting stopped as the Kingdom forces withdrew.

The Force Commander looked about and, still seeing no officer of greater rank, started shouting orders to ready the shield wall for another assault.

The Kingdom forces were slowly regrouping. They did not attack, but took up position opposite the Tsurani. The Force Commander waited,

while his soldiers made ready the lines. On all sides Kingdom horsemen stood ready, but still they did not come.

Slowly the tension grew. The Force Commander ordered a platform raised. Four Tsurani grabbed a shield, he stood upon it, and they lifted him up. His eyes widened. "They have reinforcements." Far to the south he could see the advancing columns of the South Pass Kingdom forces. They had been farther removed from the parley site and were only now reaching the battlefield.

A shout from the opposite direction caused him to look to the north: lines of the Kingdom infantry were advancing from the trees. Again he turned his attention southward and strained his eyes. In the distant haze he could see the signs of a large force of infantry following behind the cavalry. The officer ordered the shield lowered, and his Subcommander said, "What is it?"

"Their entire army is in the field." He swallowed hard, the usual Tsurani impassivity broken. "Mother of gods! There must be thirty thousand of them."

"Then we shall give them a battle worthy of a ballad before we die," . said the Subcommander.

The Force Commander looked about him. On all sides stood bleeding, wounded, and dazed soldiers. Of the Kingdom armies arrayed against them, only a third had fought. Fully twenty thousand rested soldiers approached four thousand Tsurani, half of them unable to fight at their normal efficiency.

The Force Commander shook his head. "There will be no fighting. We are cut off from home, perhaps for all time. There is no purpose." He stepped past his startled Subcommander and walked beyond the shield wall. Raising both hands above his head in the sign of parley, he walked toward Lyam, slowly, dreading the moment when he would be the first Tsurani officer in living memory to surrender his forces. It took only a matter of minutes to reach the Prince. He removed his helm and knelt. He looked up at the tall, golden-haired Prince of the Kingdom and said, "Lord Lyam. Into your care I give my men. Will you accept surrender?"

Lyam nodded. "Yes, Kasumi. I will accept surrender."

DARKNESS. THEN a gathering greyness. Pug forced his heavy eyelids open. Above him was the familiar face of Kulkan.

The face of his old teacher split into a wide smile. "It is good to see you are with us again. We did not know if you were really alive. Your body was so cold to the touch. Can you sit up?"

Pug took the offered arm and found that Meecham knelt next to him, aiding him to sit up. He could feel the cold leave his limbs as the bright sunlight warmed his body. He sat still for a moment, then said, "I think I will live." As he said it, he could feel strength returning to him. After a moment he felt able to stand and did so.

Around him he could see the assembled armies of the Kingdom.

"What has happened?"

Laurie said, "The rift is destroyed, and the Tsurani who remain have surrendered. The war is over."

Pug felt too weak for emotion. He looked at the faces of those around

him and could see deep relief in their eyes. Suddenly Kulgan engulfed him in a hug. "You risked your life to end this madness. It is your victory as much as any man's."

Pug stood quietly, then stepped away from his former master. "It is Macros who ended the war. Did he return?"

"No. Only you, and as soon as you were here, both of the staffs disappeared. There is no sign of him."

Pug shook his head, clearing away the foggiess. "What now?"

Meecham looked over his shoulder. "It might be wise if you joined Lyam. There seems to be some commotion taking place."

Laurie and Kulgan assisted Pug, for he was still weak from his ordeal within the rift. They walked to where Lyam, Arutha, Kasumi, and the assembled Kingdom nobles stood waiting. Across the field they could see the elves and dwarves approaching, with the northern Kingdom forces behind.

Pug was surprised to see the older son of the Shinzawai present, for he had thought him back on Kelewan. He looked a figure of dejection, standing without weapon or helm, and with head downcast, so he didn't see Pug and the others arrive.

Pug turned his attention to the elves and dwarves. Four figures walked at their head. Two he recognized, Dolgan and Calin. There was another dwarf with them who was unknown to the magician. As the four reached a place before the Prince, Pug realized that the tall warrior in white and gold was his boyhood friend. He stood speechless, amazed at the change in Tomas, for his old friend was now a towering figure who resembled an elf as much as a human.

Lyam was too exhausted for outrage. He looked at the Warleader of Elvandar and said quietly, "What cause did you have to attack, Tomas?"

The Prince Consort of the elves said, "The Tsurani drew weapons, Lyam. They were ready to attack the pavilion. Could you not see?" In spite of his fatigue, Lyam's voice rose. "I saw only your host attack a conference of peace. I saw nothing in the Tsurani camp that was untoward."

Kasumi raised his head. "Your Highness, on my word, we drew weapons only when we were set upon by those." He pointed at Tomas's forces.

Lyam turned his attention back to Tomas. "Did I not send word that there was to be a truce, and a peace?"

"Aye," answered Dolgan, "I was there when the sorcerer brought word."

"Sorcerer?" said Lyam. He turned and shouted, "Laurie! I would have words with you."

Laurie stepped forward and said, "Highness?"

"Did you carry word to the Elf Queen as I bid?"

"On my honor. I spoke with the Elf Queen herself."

Tomas looked Lyam in the eye, head tilted back, an expression of defiance upon his face. "And I swear that I have never seen that man before this moment. Word of the planned Tsurani treachery was carried to us by Macros."

Kulgan and Pug came forward. "Your Highness," said Kulgan, "if the

sorcerer's hand is in this-and it has been in everything else, it seems-then it may be best to unravel this mystery at leisure." Lyam still fumed, but Arutha said, "Let it lie. We can sort out this mess back at the camp."

Lyam gave a curt nod. "We return to camp." The Heir turned to Brucal and said, "Form a proper escort for the prisoners and bring them along." He then looked at Tomas. "You I would also have in my tent when we return. There is much we must explain." Tomas agreed, though he did not look happy at the prospect. Lyam shouted, "We return to camp at once. Give the order."

Kingdom officers rode toward their companies, and the order was given. Tomas turned away and found a stranger standing next to him. He looked at the smiling face, then Dolgan said, "Are you blind, boy? Can't you recognize your own boyhood companion?"

Tomas looked at Pug as the exhausted magician moved close. "Pug?" he said softly. Then he reached out and embraced his once-lost foster brother. "Pug! "

They stood together quietly, amid the clamor of armies on the move, both with tears upon their faces. Kulgan placed his hands upon both men's shoulders. "Come, we must return. There is much to speak of, and thank the gods, there is now ample time to do so."

THE CAMP WAS in full celebration. After more than nine years, the soldiers of the Kingdom knew they would not have to risk death or injury tomorrow. Songs rang out from around campfires, and laughter came from all quarters. It mattered little to most that others lay wounded in tents, tended by the priests, and that some would not live to see the first day of peace, or taste the fruits of victory. All the celebrants knew was that they were among the living, and they reveled in the fact. Later there would be time for mourning lost comrades. Now they drank in life.

Within Lyam's tent, things were more subdued. Kulgan had given a great deal of thought to the day's occurrences as they had ridden back. By the time they had reached the tent, the magician from Grydee had pieced together a rough picture of what had occurred. He had presented his opinion to those assembled there, and was now finishing.

"It would seem, then," said Kulgan, "that Macros intended for the rift to be closed. Everything points to the terrible duplicity as having been used for that purpose."

Lyam sat with Arutha and Tully by his side. "I still can't understand what would possess him to undertake such grave measures. Today's conflict cost over two thousand lives."

Pug spoke up. "I suspect we may find the answer to that and other questions when we reach his island. Until then I don't think we can begin to guess."

Lyam sighed. He said to Tomas, "At least I am convinced that you acted in good faith. I am pleased. It would have been a hard thing to imagine you responsible for all the carnage today."

Tomas held a wine cup, from which he sipped. "I also am pleased that we have no cause for contention. But I feel ill-used in this matter." "As were we all," echoed Harthorn and Dolgan.

Calin said, "It is likely that we have all played a part in some scheme of the Black One's. Perhaps it is as Pug has said, and we shall learn the truth at Sorcerer's Isle, but I for one resent this bloody business."

Lyam looked to where Kasumi sat stiffly, eyes forward, seemingly oblivious to what was being said around him. "Kasumi," Lyam said, "what am I to do with you and your men?"

Kasumi's eyes came into focus at mention of his name. He said, "Your Highness, I know something of your ways, for Laurie has taught me much. But I am still Tsurani. In our land the officers would be put to death, and the men enslaved. I may not advise you in this matter. I do not know what is the usual method of dealing with war prisoners in your world."

His tone was flat, without emotion. Lyam was about to say something, but a signal from Pug silenced him. There was something the magician wanted to say. "Kasumi?"

"Yes, Great One?" Tomas looked surprised at the honorific, but said nothing. There had been time only for the most superficial exchange of histories between the two boyhood friends as they had returned to the camp.

"What would you have done if you had not surrendered to the prince's custody?"

"We would have fought to the death, Great One."

Pug nodded. "I understand. Then you are responsible for preserving the lives of nearly four thousand of your men? And thousands more Kingdom soldiers?"

Kasumi's expression softened, revealing his shame. "I have been among your people, Great One. I may have forgotten my Tsurani training. I have brought dishonor upon my house. When the Prince has disposed of my men, I will ask permission to take my own life, though it may be too much of an honor for him to grant."

Brucal and others looked shocked at this. Lyam showed no expression, but simply said, "You have earned no dishonor. You would have aided no cause in dying. There ceased to be one when the rift was destroyed."

Kasumi said, "It is our way."

Lyam said, "No longer. This is now your homeland, for you have no other. What Kulgan and Pug have said about rifts makes it unlikely you shall ever return to Tsuranuanni. Here you will remain, and it is my intention to see that prospect turned to good advantage for us all."

A faint flicker of hope entered Kasumi's eyes. The Heir turned toward Lord Brucal and said, "My lord Duke of Yabon. How do you judge the Tsurani soldiers?"

The old Duke smiled. "Among the finest I have ever beheld." Kasumi showed a little pride at the remark. "They match the Dark Brotherhood for ferocity and are of nobler nature; they are as disciplined as Keshian dog-soldiers and have the stamina of Natalese Rangers. On the whole they are without question superior soldiers."

"Would an army of such provide additional security for our troubled northern borders?"

Brucal smiled. "The LaMutian garrison was among the hardest hit during the war. They would be a valuable addition there."

The Earl of LaMut echoed his Duke's comment. Lyam turned to Kasumi. "Would you still take your life if your men could remain freemen and soldiers?"

The Shinzawai son said, "How is that possible, Your Highness?"

"If you and your men will swear loyalty to the crown, I will place you under the command of the Earl of LaMut. You will be both freemen and citizens and will be given the charge to defend our northern border against the enemies of humanity who abide in the Northlands."

Kasumi sat silently, unsure of what to say. Laurie stepped over to Kasumi and said, "There is no dishonor."

Kasumi's face broke into an expression of open relief. "I accept, as I am sure my men will." He paused, then added, "We came as an honor guard for the Emperor. From what I have heard said here, we have been used by this sorcerer as much as anyone. I would not have any more blood spilled on his account. I thank Your Highness."

Lord Vandros said, "I think a Knight-Captaincy would be proper for the leader of nearly four thousand. Do you agree, my lord Duke?" Brucal nodded in agreement, and Vandros said, "Come, Captain, we should speak with your new command."

Kasumi rose, bowed to Lyam, and left with the Earl of LaMut. Arutha touched his brother on the shoulder. Lyam turned his head, and the Prince said, "Enough of matters of state. It is time to celebrate the ending of the war."

Lyam smiled. "True." He turned to Pug. "Magician, run and fetch your lovely wife and fine son. I would have things that smack of home and family about."

Tomas looked at Pug. "Wife? Son? What is this?"

Pug laughed. "There is much to talk about. We can catch up with each other after I bring my family."

He made his way to his own tent, where Katala was telling William a story. They both jumped up and ran to him, for they had not seen him since his return. He had sent a soldier with the news that he was well but busy with the Prince.

"Katala, Lyam would like you to join us for dinner."

William tugged at his father's robe. "I want to come too, Papa."

Pug picked up his son. "You too, William."

THE CELEBRATION within the tent was of a quieter sort than the one taking place outside. Still, they had been entertained by Laurie's ballads and had enjoyed the exhilaration of knowing that peace had finally come. The food was the same camp fare as before, but somehow it tasted better. A great deal of wine had also added to the festive mood. Lyam sat with a cup of wine in his hand. Around the tent the others were engaged in quiet conversation. The Heir was a little drunk, and none grudged him that relief, for he had endured much in the last month. Kulgan, Tully, and Arutha, who knew him best, understood that Lyam was thinking of his father, who but for a Tsurani arrow would now be sitting here with them. With the responsibility of first the war, then the succession thrust upon him, Lyam had not found time for mourning as his brother had. Now he was fully feeling the loss.

Tully stood. In a loud voice he said, "I am tired, Your Highness. Have

"I your leave to withdraw?"

Lyam smiled at his old teacher. "Of course. Good night, Tully."

The others in the tent quickly followed suit and took leave of the Heir. Outside the pavilion the guests bade each other good night. Laurie, Kulgan, Meecham, and the dwarves also left, leaving Pug and his family standing with Calin and Tomas.

The childhood friends had spent the evening exchanging histories of the last nine years. Each was equally amazed at the other's story. Pug had expressed interest in the Dragon Lords' magic, as had Kulgan. They expressed an interest in visiting the Dragon's Hall someday. Dolgan allowed he would be willing to guide them should they wish to make the journey.

Now the reawakened friendship glowed within the two young men, though they understood it was not what it had once been, for there had been many and great changes in both. As much as by the dragon armor and the black robe, this point was dramatized by the presence of William and Katala.

Katala had found the dwarves and elves fascinating-William had found everything fascinating, especially the dwarves, and now lay asleep in his mother's arms. Of Tomas she didn't know what to make. He resembled Calin in many ways, but still looked a great deal like the other men in camp.

Tomas regarded the sleeping boy. "He has his mother's looks, but there is enough devil in him to put me in mind of another boy I knew."

Pug smiled at that. "His life will be far calmer, I hope."

Arutha left his brother's tent and came to join them. He stood beside the two boys who had ridden with him to the mines of Mac Mordain Cadal so many years ago. "I should probably not say this, but years ago when you first came to visit my father, Calin-two boys were overheard in conversation while they tussled in a hay wagon."

Tomas and Pug both looked at the Prince uncomprehendingly. "You don't remember, do you?" Arutha asked. "A blond thin-ribbed lad was sitting atop a shorter boy promising he would someday be a great warrior who would be welcomed in Elvandar."

Pug and Tomas both laughed at that. "I remember," said Pug.

"And the other promised to become the greatest magician in the Kingdom."

Katala said, "Perhaps William will also grow up to realize his dream."

Arutha smiled with a wicked light in his eyes. "Then watch him closely. We had a long chat before he went to sleep, and he told me he wanted to grow up to be a dwarf." All of them laughed, except Katala, who looked at her son for a moment with worry upon her face, but then she, too, joined in the merriment.

Arutha and Calin bade the others good night, and Tomas said, "I, too, will be to bed."

Pug said, "Will you come to Rillanon with us?"

"No, I may not. I would be with my lady. But when the child is born, you must guest with us, for there will be a great celebration." They promised they would come. Tomas said, "We are for home in the morning.

The dwarves will return to their villages, for there is much work to be done there. They have been overlong from their families. And with



the return of Tholin's hammer, there is talk of a moot, to name Dolgan king in the West." Lowering his voice, he added, "Though my old friend will most likely use that hammer on the first dwarf to openly suggest it in his presence." Placing his hand upon Pug's shoulder, he said, "It is well we both came through this, even in the depths of my strange madness, I never forgot about you."

Pug said, "I never forgot you either, Tomas."

"When you unravel this mystery on Sorcerer's Isle, I trust you will send word?"

Pug said he would. They embraced, saying good-bye, and Tomas walked away, but stopped and looked back, a boyish glint in his eyes. "Still, I would love to be there when you meet Carline again with a wife and son in tow."

Pug flushed, for he viewed that coming reunion with mixed feelings. He waved to Tomas as he walked from sight, then found Katala regarding him with a determined look upon her face. In even, measured tones she said, "Who is Carline?"

LYAM LOOKED UP as Arutha entered the command tent. The younger brother said, "I thought you would have retired by now. You're exhausted."

"I wanted some time to think, Arutha. I have had little time alone and wanted to put things in order." His voice was tired and troubled. Arutha sat next to his brother. "What sort of things?"

"This war, Father, you, I"-he thought of Martin-"other things Arutha, I don't know if I can be King."

Arutha raised his eyebrows a little. "It is not as if you had a choice, Lyam. You will be King, so make the best of it."

"I could refuse the crown in favor of my brother," said Lyam slowly, "as Erland renounced it in favor of Rodric."

"And what a fine kettle of soup that became. Should you want a civil war, that would be one way to get it. The Kingdom cannot afford a debate in the Congress of Lords. There are still too many wounds to be healed between East and West. And du Bas-Tyra is still at large."

Lyam sighed. "You would make a better king, Arutha."

Arutha laughed. "Me? I am little pleased at the prospect of being prince of Krondor. Look, Lyam, when we were boys, I envied you the affection you gained so quickly. People always preferred you to me. As I grew older, I understood it wasn't that I was disliked; it was simply there was something about you that brings out trust and love in people. That is a good quality for a king to possess. I never envied the fact you would follow Father as Duke, nor do I now envy your crown. I once thought I might take some time after the war to travel, but now that will not be possible, for I must rule Krondor. So do not wish this additional burden of the entire Kingdom upon me. I would not take it."

"Still, you would make a better king." Lyam caught Arutha's gaze and held it.

Arutha paused, frowned, then fixed his brother with a skeptical look. "Perhaps, but you are to be King, and I expect you will remain King for quite some time." He stretched as he rose. "I am for bed. It has been a long and hard day." Nearing the entrance to the tent, he said, "Ease

your doubts, Lyam. You will be a good ruler. With Caldric to advise you, and the others, Kulgan, Tully, and Pug, you will lead us through this time of rebuilding."

Lyam said, "Arutha, before you go . . ." Arutha waited, as Lyam made a decision. "I wish you to go with Kulgan and Pug to Sorcerer's Isle. You've been there once before, and . . . I'd like your judgment on what is found there." Arutha was displeased and started to object. Lyam cut him off. "I know you wish to go to Krondor, but it will take only a few days. There will be twelve days between the time we reach Rillanon and the coronation, ample time for you to join us."

Arutha again began to object, then with a wry smile, acceded. "Trust in yourself, Lyam. If I won't take the crown, you're left with it." As he departed the tent, he added with a laugh, "There's no other brother to claim it."

Lyam sat alone, absently sipping at his wine. With another long sigh he said to himself, "There is one other, Arutha, and may the gods help me decide what is right to do."

33

## LEGACY

The SHIP DROPPED ANCHOR.

The crew secured the sails aloft while the landing party made ready. Meecham watched the preparation of the longboat. The magicians were anxious to reach the castle of Macros, for they had more questions than the others. Arutha was also curious, after resigning himself to the voyage.

He found he also had little desire to take part in the long funeral procession that had left from Ylith the day they sailed. He had buried his grief for his father deep inside and would deal with it in his own time. Laurie had stayed with Kasumi to aid the assimilation of the Tsurani soldiers into the LaMutian garrison, and would meet them later in Rillanon.

Lyam and his nobles had shipped for Krondor, escorting the bodies of Borric and Rodric. They would be joined by Anita and Carline, then all would convey the dead in a procession of state to Rillanon, where they would be laid to rest in the tomb of their ancestors. After the traditional period of twelve days' mourning, Lyam would be crowned King. By then all who would attend the coronation would have gathered in Rillanon. Pug and Kulgan's business should be completed in ample time for them to reach the capital.

The boat was readied, and Arutha, Pug, and Kulgan joined Meecham. The longboat was lowered, and six guards bent their backs to the oars. The sailors had been greatly relieved that they were not required to accompany the landing party, for in spite of the magicians reassurances, they had no desire to set foot upon Sorcerer's Isle.

The boat was beached, and the passengers stepped out. Arutha looked about. "There seems to have been no change here since we last came."

Kulgan stretched, for the ship's quarters had been cramped, and he enjoyed the sensation of dry land under his feet again. "I would have

been surprised to find it otherwise. Macros was one to keep his house in order, I wager."

Arutha turned and said, "You six will stay here. If you hear our call, come quickly." The Prince started toward the path up the hill, and the others fell in without comment. They reached the place where the path forked, and Arutha said, "We come as guests. I thought it best not to appear invaders."

Kulgan said nothing, being occupied with observing the castle they were approaching. The strange blue light that had been so visible when they had last visited the island was absent from the window of the high tower. The castle had the look of a place deserted, without movement or sound. The drawbridge was down and the portcullis raised. Meecham observed, "At least we won't have to storm the place."

When they reached the edge of the drawbridge, they halted. The castle rose above them, its high walls, and taller towers, forbidding. It was built of dark stone, unfamiliar to them. Around the great arch over the bridge, strange carvings of alien creatures regarded them with fixed gazes. Horned and winged beasts sat perched atop ledges, seemingly frozen in an instant, so cleverly were they fashioned.

They stepped on the bridge and crossed the deep ravine that separated the castle from the rest of the island. Meecham looked down, seeing the rock walls of the crevice fall away to the level of the sea, where waves crashed through the passage between. "It serves better than most moats I've seen. You'd think twice before trying to cross this while someone was shooting at you from the walls."

They entered the court and looked about, as if expecting to see someone appear at one of the many doors in the walls at any moment.

Nowhere was there sign of any living creature, yet the grounds about the central keep were well tended and in order.

When no one was forthcoming, Pug said, "I imagine we'll find what we're after in the keep." The others moved with him toward the broad stairs that led to the main doors. As they mounted the steps, the large doors began to swing open, until they could all see a figure standing in the darkness beyond. As the doors finished their movement with a loud thump against the keep walls, the figure stepped forward into the sunlight.

Meecham's sword was in his hand without thinking, for the creature before them bore a strong resemblance to a goblin. After a brief examination, Meecham put up his weapon, the creature had made no threatening gesture, but simply stood waiting for them at the top of the stairs.

It was taller than the average goblin, being nearly Meecham's height. Thick ridges dominated its forehead, and a large nose was the focus of its face, but it was nobler in features than a goblin. Two black, twinkling eyes regarded them as they resumed their climb. As they came up to it, the creature gave a toothy grin. Its head was covered with a thick mat of black hair, and its skin was tinged with the faint green of the goblin tribe, but it lacked the hunched-shouldered posture of a goblin, instead standing erect much like a man. It wore a finely fashioned tunic and trousers, both bright green. Upon its feet were a pair of polished black boots, reaching nearly to its knees.

The creature said, grinning, "Welcome, masters, welcome. I am Gathis, and I have the honor of acting as your host in my master's absence." There was a slight hiss to its speech.

Kulgan said, "Your master is Macros the Black?"

"Of course. It has been ever thus. Please enter."

The four men accompanied Gathis into the large entry hall and stopped to look about. Except for the absence of people and of the usual heraldic banners, this hall looked much like the one in castle Crydee.

"My master has left explicit instructions for your visit, as much as was possible to anticipate, so I have prepared the castle for your arrival. Would you care for some refreshments? There are food and wine ready."

Kulgan shook his head. He was unsure of what this creature was, but he was not overly comfortable with anything that so resembled a servant of the Dark Brotherhood. "Macros said there would be a message. I would see it at once."

Gathis bowed slightly. "As you will. Please come with me."

He led them along a series of corridors to a flight of stairs that spiraled up into the large tower. They mounted the steps and soon came to a locked door. "My master said you would be able to open this door. Should you fail, you are impostors, and I am to deal with you harshly."

Meecham gripped his sword at hearing this, but Pug placed his hand on the big franklin's arm. "Since the rift is closed, half my power is lost, that which I gained from Kelewan, but this should prove no obstacle."

Pug concentrated upon opening the door. Instead of the usual response of the door swinging open, a change occurred in the door itself.

The wood seemed to become fluid, flowing and ebbing as it fashioned its surface into a new form. In a few moments a face could be seen, formed in the wood. It looked like a bas-relief, with a slight resemblance to Macros. It was very lifelike in detail and appeared to be asleep. Then its eyelids opened, and they could see that the eyes were alive, black centers showing against white. Its mouth moved, and a voice issued from it, the sound deep and resonant as it spoke in perfect Tsurani.

"What is the first duty?"

Without thinking, Pug answered, "To serve the Empire."

The face flowed back into the door, and when there was no trace of it before them, the door swung aside. They entered and found themselves in the study of Macros the Black, a large room occupying the entire top of the tower.

Gathis said, "I take it I have the honor of hosting Masters Kulgan, Pug, and Meecham?" He then studied the fourth member of the party.

"And you must be Prince Arutha?" When they nodded, he said, "My master was unsure if Your Highness would attend, though he thought it likely. He was certain the other three gentlemen would be here." He indicated the room with a sweep of his hand. "All that you see is at your disposal. If you will excuse me, I will return with your message and some refreshments."

Gathis left, and all four looked at the contents of the room. Except for one bare wall where it was obvious that a bookcase or cupboard had recently been removed, the entire room was surrounded with tall shelves from floor to ceiling, all heavily laden with books and scrolls. Pug and

Kulgan were almost paralyzed by indecision about where to begin their investigation.

Arutha solved that problem by crossing over to a shelf where lay a large parchment bound with a red ribbon. He took it down and laid it upon the round table in the center of the room. A shaft of sunlight from the room's single large window fell across the parchment as he unrolled it.

Kulgan came over to see what he had found. "It is a map of Midkemia!"

Pug and Meecham crossed over to stand behind Kulgan and Arutha. "Such a map!" Prince Arutha exclaimed. "I have never seen its like." His finger stabbed at a spot upon a large landmass in the center. "Look! Here is the Kingdom." Across a small portion of the map were inscribed the words Kingdom of the isles. Below could be seen the larger borders of the Empire of Great Kesh. To the south of the Empire, the states of the Keshian Confederacy were clearly shown.

"To the best of my knowledge," said Kulgan, "few from the Kingdom have ever ventured into the Confederacy. Our only knowledge of its members is through the Empire and a few of our more venturesome captains who've visited some of their ports. We hardly know the names of these nations, and nothing about them."

Pug said, "We learn much about our world in an instant. Look at how small a part of this continent the Kingdom is." He pointed to the great sweep of the Northlands to the north of the Kingdom, and the farreaching mass of land below the Confederacy. The entire continent bore the inscription Iriagia.

Kulgan said, "It appears there is a great deal more to our Midkemia than we had dreamed." He indicated additional landmasses across the sea. These were labeled Wifiet and Novindus. Upon each, cities and states were delineated. Two large chains of islands were also shown, many with cities marked. Kulgan shook his head. "There have been rumors of traders from far distant lands, venturing into the trading ports in the Keshian Confederacy, or treating with the pirates of the Sunset Islands, but they are only rumors. It is small wonder we have never heard of these places. It would be a brave captain who set his ship upon a course for so far a port."

They were brought out of their study by the sound of Gathis returning to the room. He carried a tray with a decanter and four wine cups. "My master bade me say that you are to enjoy the hospitality of his home as long as you desire." He placed the tray on the table and poured wine into the cups. He then removed a scroll from within his tunic and handed it to Kulgan. "He bade me give you this. I will retire while you consider my master's message. Should you need me, simply speak my name, and I will return quickly." He bowed slightly and left the room.

Kulgan regarded the scroll. It was sealed with black wax, impressed with the letter m. He broke the seal and unrolled the parchment. He started to read to himself, then said, "Let us sit."

Pug rolled up the large map and put it away, then returned to the table where the others were sitting. He pulled out a chair and waited with Meecham and Arutha while Kulgan read. Kulgan shook his head

slowly. "Listen," he said, and read aloud:

" 'To the magicians Kulgan and Pug, greetings. I have anticipated some of your questions and have endeavored to answer them as best I can. I fear there are others that must go begging, as much about myself must remain known only to me. I am not what the Tsurani would call a Great One, though I have visited that world, as Pug knows, upon a number of occasions. My magic is peculiar to myself and defies description in your terms of Greater and Lesser Paths. Suffice it to say I am a walker of many paths.

" 'I see myself as a servant of the gods, though that may be only my vanity speaking. Whatever the truth is, I have traveled to many lands and worked for many causes.

" 'Of my early life I will say little. I am not of this world, having been born in a land distant both in space and time. It is not unlike this world, but there are ample reasons to count it strange by your standards.

" 'I am older than I care to remember, old even by the elves' reckoning.

For reasons I do not understand, I have lived for ages, though my own people are as mortal as yours. It may be that when I entered into the magic arts, I unwittingly gave this near-immortality to myself, or it may be the gift-or curse-of the gods.

"Since becoming a sorcerer, I have been fated to know my own future, as others know their pasts. I have never retreated from what I knew to be before me, though often I wished to. I have served great kings and simple peasants both. I have lived in the greatest cities and the rudest huts. Often I have understood the meaning of my participation, sometimes not, but always I have followed the foreordained path that was set for me."

Kulgan stopped for a moment. "This explains how he knew so much." He resumed his reading.

" 'Of all my labors, my role in the rift war was the hardest. Never have I experienced such desire to turn from the path before me. Never have I been responsible for the loss of so many lives, and I mourn for them more than you can know. But even as you consider my "treachery," consider my situation.

" 'I was unable to close the rift without Pug's aid. It was fated the war to continue while he learned his craft on Kelewan. For the price paid, consider the gain. There now is one upon Midkemia who: practices the Greater Art, which was lost in the coming of man during the Chaos Wars. The benefit will be judged only by history, but I think it a valuable one.

" 'As to my closing the rift once peace was at hand, I can only say it was vital. The Tsurani Great Ones had forgotten that rifts are subject to the Enemy's detection.'" Kulgan looked up in surprise. "Enemy? ~ this refers to something I think you need explain." '

Pug told them quickly of what ~he knew of the legendary Enemy. Arutha said, "Can such a terrible being really exist?" His expression betrayed disbelief.

Pug said, "That it once existed, there is no doubt, and for a being of such power still to endure is not beyond imagining. But of all conceivable reasons for Macros's actions, this is the last I would have thought possible. No one in the Assembly had dreamed of it. It's incredible."

Kulgan resumed reading. "It is to him like a beacon, drawing that terrible entity across space and time. It might have been years more before he would have appeared, but once here, all the powers of your world would be hard-pressed, perhaps even insufficient, to dislodge him from Midkemia. The rift had to be closed. The reasons I chose to ensure its closing at the cost of so many lives should be apparent to you."

Pug interrupted. "What does he mean, 'should be apparent'?"

Kulgan said, "Macros was nothing, it seems, if not a student of human nature. Could he alone have convinced the King and Emperor to close the rift, with so much to be gained by keeping it open? Perhaps, perhaps not, but in any event there would have been the all-too-human temptation to keep it open 'just a little longer.' I think he knew that and was ensuring there would be no choice." Kulgan returned to reading the scroll. "As to what will happen now, I cannot say. My seeing of the future ends with the explosion of the rift. Whether it is, finally, my appointed hour, or simply the beginning of some new era of my existence, I do not know. In the event you have witnessed my death, I have decided upon the following course. All my research, with some exceptions, is contained within this room. It is to be used to further the Greater and Lesser Arts. It is my wish that you take possession of the books, scrolls, and tomes contained here and use them to that end. A new epoch of magic is beginning in the Kingdom, and it is my wish for others to benefit from my works. In your hands I leave this new age.'

"It is signed, 'Macros.'"

Kulgan placed the scroll upon the table. Pug said, "One of the last things he said to me was he wished to be remembered kindly."

They said nothing for a time, then Kulgan called, "Gathis!"

Within seconds the creature appeared at the doorway. "Yes, Master Kulgan?"

"Do you know what is contained within this scroll?"

"Yes, Master Kulgan. My master was most explicit in his instructions. He made sure that we were aware of his requirements."

"We?" said Arutha.

Gathis smiled his toothy grin. "I am but one of my master's servants. The others are instructed to keep from your sight, for it was feared their presence might cause you some discomfort. My master lacked most of the human prejudices and was content to judge each creature he met on its own merits."

"What exactly are you?" asked Pug.

"I am of a race akin to the goblins, as the elves are to the Dark Brotherhood. We were an old race and perished but for a few, long before humans came to the Bitter Sea. Those that were left were brought here by Macros, and I am the last."

Kulgan regarded the creature. In spite of his appearance, there was something about him that was likable. "What will you do now?"

"I will wait here for my master's return, keeping his home in order."

"You expect him to return?" asked Pug.

"Most likely. In a day, or a year, or a century. It does not matter.

Things will be ready for him should he return."

"What if he has perished?" asked Arutha.

"In that event, I shall grow old and die waiting, but I think not. I

have served the Black One for a very long time. Between us is . . . an understanding. If he were dead, I think I would know. He is merely . . . absent. Even if he is dead, he may return. Time is not to my master as it is to other men. I am content to wait."

Pug thought about this. "He must truly have been the master of all magic."

Gathis's smile broadened. "He would laugh to hear that, master. He was always complaining of there being so much to learn and so little time to learn it. And that from a man who had lived years beyond numbering."

Kulgan said, as he rose from his chair, "We will have to fetch men to carry all these things back to the ship." .

Gathis said, "Worry not, master. Retire to your ship when you are ready. Leave two boats on the beach at the cove. At first light the next day you will find everything placed aboard, packed for shipment."

Kulgan nodded. "Very well, then we should start at once to catalog all these works, before we move them." .

Gathis went over to a shelf and returned with a rolled parchment. "In anticipation of your needs, master, I have prepared such a listing of all the works here."

Kulgan unrolled the parchment and began reading the inventory of works. His eyes widened. "Listen," he said, excitedly. "There's a copy of Vitalus's Expectations of Matter Transformation here." His eyes grew bigger still. "And Spandric's Temporal Research. That work was thought-lost a hundred years ago!" He looked at the others, wonder upon his face. "And hundreds of volumes with Macros's name on them. This is a treasure beyond measure."

Gathis said, "I am pleased that you find it so, master."

Kulgan started to ask for those volumes to be brought to him, but Arutha said, "Wait Kulgan. Once you begin, we'll have to tie you up to get you out of here. Let us return to the ship and wait for all this to be brought. We must be off soon."

Kulgan looked like a child whose sweets had been taken from him.

Arutha, Pug, and Meecham all chuckled at the stout magician. Pug said, "There is no good reason to stay now. We shall have years to study these after the coronation. Look around, Kulgan. Do you mean to inhale all this in one breath?"

A look of resignation crossed Kulgan's face. "Very well."

Pug surveyed all in the room. "Think of it. An academy for the study of magic, with Macros's library at the heart."

Kulgan's eyes grew luminous. "I had all but forgotten the Duke's bequest. A place to learn. No longer will an apprentice learn from this master or that, but from many. With this legacy and your own teachings, Pug, we have a wonderful start."

Arutha said, "Let us be on our way if we're to have any sort of start. There's a new king to crown, and the longer you tarry, the more likely you'll lose yourself in here."

Kulgan looked as if his good name were impugned. "Well, I will take a few things to study while on the shi~if you have no objections?"

Arutha raised a placating hand. "Whatever you wish," he said with a rueful smile. "But please, no more than we can reasonably lug down to



the boat."

Kulgan smiled, his mood lightening. "Agreed." He turned to Gathis.

"Would you fetch those two volumes I mentioned."

Gathis held out the two volumes, old and well read. Kulgan looked surprised, while Gathis said, "I thought you might reach such an understanding and removed them from the shelves while you discussed the matter."

Kulgan walked toward the door, shaking his head slowly as he repnded the two books he held. The others followed, and Gathis closed

the door behind them. The goblin-like creature guided them to the courtyard and bid them a safe journey at the door of the keep.

When the large doors had closed behind them, Meecham said, "This fellow Macros seems to have raised five questions for each he answered."

Kulgan said, "You have that right, old friend. Perhaps we will gain

additional knowledge from his notes, and other works. Perhaps not, and

maybe that's the right of it."

34

RILLANON WAS IN A FESTIVE MOOD.

Everywhere banners rippled in the breeze, and garlands of summer flowers replaced the black bunting that had marked the period of mourning for the late King and his cousin Borric. Now they would be crowning a new king, and the people rejoiced. The people of Rillanon knew little of Lyam, but he was fair to view, and generous with his smile in public. To the populace it was as if the sun had come out from behind the dark clouds that had been Rodric's reign.

Few among the people were aware of the many royal guards who: circulated throughout the city, always alert for signs of Guy du Bas-Tyra's agents and possible assassins. And fewer still noticed the plainly dressed men who were always near when groups gathered to speak of the new King, listening to what was said.

Arutha cantered his horse toward the palace, leaving Pug, Meecham, and Kulgan behind. He cursed the fate that had delayed them nearly a week, becalmed less than three days from Krondor, then the slowness of their journey to Salador. It was midmorning, and already the Priests of Ishap were bearing the King's new crown through the city. In less than three hours they would appear before the throne and Lyam would take the crown.

Arutha reached the palace, and shouts from the guards echoed across the vast courtyard, "Prince Arutha arrives!"

Arutha gave his mount to a page and hurried up the steps to the palace. As he reached the entranceway, Anita came running in his direction, a radiant smile on her face. "Oh," she cried, "it is so good to see you!"

He smiled back at her and said, "It is good to see you, also. I must get ready for the ceremony. Where is Lyam?"

"He has secreted himself in the Royal Tomb. He left word you were to come straight away to him there." Her voice was troubled. "There is something strange taking place here, but no one seems to know what it

is. Only Martin Longbow has seen Lyam since supper last night, and when I saw Martin, he had the strangest look upon his face."

Arutha laughed. "Martin is always full of strange looks. Come, let us go to Lyam."

She refused to let him ignore the warning. "No, you go alone; that is what Lyam ordered. Besides, I must dress for the ceremony. But, Arutha, there is something very queer in the wind."

Arutha's manner turned more reflective. Anita was a good judge of such things. "Very well. I'll have to wait for my things to be brought from the ship, anyway. I will see Lyam, then when this mystery is cleared up, join you at the ceremony."

"Good."

"Where is Carline?"

"Fussing over this and that. I'll tell her you've arrived."

She kissed his cheek and hurried off. Arutha hadn't been to the vault of his ancestors since he was a boy, the first time he had come to Rillanon, for Rodric's coronation. He asked a page to lead him there, and the boy guided him through a maze of corridors.

The palace had been through many transformations over the ages, new wings being added on, new constructions over those destroyed by fire, earthquake, or war, but in the center of the vast edifice the ancient first keep remained. The only clue they were entering the ancient halls was the sudden appearance of dark stone walls, worn smooth by time. Two guards stood watch by a door over which was carved a bas-relief crest of the conDoin kings, a crowned lion holding a sword in its claws. The page said, "Prince Arutha," and the guards opened the door. Arutha stepped through into a small anteroom, with a long flight of stairs leading down.

He followed the stairs past rows of brightly burning torches that stained the stones of the walls with black soot. The stairs ended, and Arutha stood before a large, high-arched doorway. On both sides loomed heroic statues of ancient conDoin kings. To the right, with features dulled with age, stood the statue of Dannis, first conDoin King of Rillanon, some seven hundred fifty years past. To the left stood the statue of Delong, the only King called "the Great," the King who first brought the banner of Rillanon to the mainland with the conquest of Bas-Tyra, two hundred fifty years after Dannis.

Arutha passed between his ancestors' likenesses and entered the burial vault. He walked between the ancient forebears of his line, entombed in the walls and upon great catafalques. Kings and queens, princes and princesses, scoundrels and rogues, saints and scholars lined his way. At the far end of the huge chamber he found Lyam sitting next to the catafalque that supported his father's stone coffin. A likeness of Borric had been carved in the coffin's surface, and it looked as if the late Duke of Crydee lay sleeping.

Arutha approached slowly, for Lyam seemed deep in thought. Lyam looked up and said, "I feared you might come late."

"As did I. We had Wretched weather and slow progress, but we are all here. Now, what is this strange business? Anita told me you've been here all night, and there is some mystery. what is it?"

"I have given great thought to this matter, Arutha. The whole of the

Kingdom will know within a few hours' time, but I wanted you to see what I have done and hear what I must say before any others."

"Anita said Martin was here with you this morning. What is this, Lyam?"

Lyam stepped away from his father's catafalque and pointed. Inscribed upon the stones of the burial place were the words:

HERE lIES BOrRiC, ThIRd DUKE OF CRYDEE,  
HUSBAND OF CATHERINE,  
FATHER OF  
MARTIN,  
LYAM,  
ARUTHa,  
AMD CARLIME

Arutha's lips moved, but no words came forth. He shook his head, then said, "What madness is this?"

Lyam came between Arutha and the likeness of their father.

"No madness, Arutha. Father acknowledged Martin on his deathbed. He is He is our brother. He is the eldest."

Arutha's face became contorted with rage. "why didn't you tell me?" His voice was tormented. "What right had you to hide this from me?"

Lyam raised his own voice. "All who knew were sworn to secrecy. I could not risk anyone knowing until the peace was made. There was too much to lose."

Arutha shoved past his brother, looking in disbelief at the inscription.

"It all makes an evil sense. Martin's exclusion from the Choosing. The way Father always kept an eye on his whereabouts. His freedom to come and go as he pleased." Bitterness rang in Arutha's words. "But why now? ' Why did Father acknowledge Martin after so many years of denial?"

Lyam tried to comfort Arutha. "I've pieced together what I could from Kulgan and Tully. Besides them, no one knew, not even Fannon. Father was a guest of Bruca's when he was in his first year of office, After Grandfather's death. He tumbled a pretty serving girl and conceived Martin. It was five years before Father knew of him. Father had come to court, met Mother, and married. When he learned of Martin, he had already been abandoned by his mother to the monks of Silban's Abbey. Father chose to let Martin remain in their care.

"When I was born, Father began to feel remorse over having a son unknown to him, and when I was six, Martin was ready for Choosing. .Father arranged to have him brought to Crydee. But he wouldn't acknowledge him, for fear of shaming Mother."

'Then why now?"

Lyam looked at the likeness of their father. "Who knows what passes through a man's mind in the moments before death? Perhaps more guilt, or some sense of honor. Whatever the reason, he acknowledged Martin, and Bruca bore witness."

Anger still sounded in Arutha's voice. "Now we must deal with this "madness, regardless of Father's reasons for creating it." He fixed Lyam

with a harsh stare. "What did he say when you brought him down to see this?"

Lyam looked away, as if pained by what he now said. "He stood silently, then I saw him weep. Finally he said, 'I am pleased he told you.' 'Arutha, he knew.'" Lyam gripped his brother's arm. "All those years Father thought him ignorant of his birthright, and he knew. And never once did he seek to turn that knowledge to his own gain."

Arutha's anger subsided. "Did he say anything more?"

"Only 'Thank you, Lyam,' and then he left."

Arutha paced away for a moment, then faced Lyam. "Martin is a man, as good a man as I've ever known. I'll be the first to say so. but this acknowledgment! My gods, do you know what you've done?"

"I'm aware of my actions."

'you've placed all we've won over the last nine years in the balance, Lyam. Shall we fight ambitious eastern lords who might rally in Martin's name? Do we end one war simply to begin an even more bitter one?"

"There will be no contestation."

Arutha stopped his pacing. His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? Has Martin promised to voice no claim?"

"No. I have decided not to oppose Martin should he choose the crown."

Arutha was speechless for a moment, in shock as he regarded Lyam. For the first time he understood the terrible doubts his brother had been voicing over being King. "You don't want to be King," he said, his tone accusatory.

Lyam laughed bitterly. "No sane man would. You have said as much yourself, brother. I don't know if I am a match for the burdens of kingship. But the matter is out of my hands now. If Martin speaks for himself as King, I will acknowledge his right."

"His right! The royal signet passed to your hand, before most of the Lords of the Kingdom. You are not sick Erland deferring to his brother's son because of ill health and by reason of no clear succession. You are the named Heir!"

Lyam lowered his head. "The announcement of succession is invalid, Arutha. Rodric named me Heir as 'eldest conDoin male,' which I am not. Martin is."

Arutha confronted his brother. "A pretty point of law, Lyam, but one that may prove the destruction of this Kingdom! Should Martin voice a claim before the congress assembled, the Priests of Ishap will break the crown, and the matter passes to the Congress of Lords for resolution. Even with Guy in hiding, there are dozens of dukes, scores of earls, and a host of barons who would willingly cut their neighbors' throats to convene such a congress. Such bargaining would end with half the estates in the Kingdom switching hands in trade for votes. It would be a carnival!"

"If you take the crown, Bas-Tyra cannot act. But if you back Martin, many will refuse to follow. A deadlocked congress is exactly what Guy wishes. I'll bet all I own he is somewhere in the city at this very moment, plotting against such an event. If the eastern lords bolt, Guy will emerge, and many will flock to his banner."

Lyam appeared overwhelmed by his brother's words. "I cannot say

what will happen, Arutha. But I know I could not do other than I have done."

Arutha looked on the verge of striking Lyam. "You may have inherited the burden of Father's sense of family honor, but it will fall to the rest of us to deal with the killing! Heaven's mercy, Lyam, what do you think will happen if some heretofore nameless huntsman sits the conDoin throne simply because our father tumbled a pretty maid nearly forty years ago! We shall have civil war!"

Lyam stood firm. "Should our positions have been reversed, would you have robbed Martin of his birthright?"

Arutha's anger vanished. He looked at his brother with open amazement on his face. "Gods! You feel guilt because Father denied Martin all his life, don't you?" He stepped away from Lyam, as if trying to gain perspective on him. "Should our positions have been reversed, I most assuredly would deny Martin his birthright. After thirty-seven years, what matter a few more days? After I was King, firm on my throne, then I would make him a duke, give him an army to command, name him First Adviser, whatever need be to salve my conscience, but not until the Kingdom was secure. I would not wish Martin to play Borric the First to Guy's Don the Pretender, and I would do whatever must be done to see that would not come to pass."

Lyam sighed with deep regret. "Then you and I are two different sorts of men, Arutha. I told you back at camp I thought you would make a better king than I. Perhaps you are right, but what's done is done."

"Does Brucal know of this?"

"Only we three." He looked directly at Arutha. "Only our father's sons."

Arutha flushed, irritated at the remark. "Don't misunderstand me, Lyam. I hold Martin in no little affection, but there are issues here much larger than any personal consideration." He thought quietly for a moment. "Then it is in Martin's hands. If you had to do this, at least you did right in not making it a public matter. There will be shock enough should Martin come forth at the coronation. At least with advance warning we can prepare."

Arutha moved toward the stairs, then stopped and faced his brother.

"What you said cuts both ways, Lyam. Perhaps because you cannot deny Martin, you'll make a better king than I.' But as much as I love you, I'll not let the Kingdom be destroyed over the succession."

Lyam seemed unable to contest with his brother any longer. Fatigue, a weary resignation toward what fate would bring, sounded in his words.

"What will you do?"

"What must be done. I will ensure that those who are loyal to us are forewarned. If there comes a need to fight, then let us have the advantage of surprise." He paused for a moment. "I have nothing but the greatest affection for Martin, Lyam, you must know that. I hunted with him as a boy, and he was in no small part responsible for my safely getting Anita away from Guy's watchdogs, a debt beyond repaying. In another time and place, I would gladly accept him as my brother. But should it come to bloodshed, Lyam, I'll willingly kill him."

Arutha left the vault of his ancestors. Lyam stood alone, feeling the chill of ages press in upon him.

Pug LOOKED OUT the window, reminiscing. Katala came to his side, and he came out of his reverie. "You look lovely," he said. She was dressed in a brilliant gown of deep red, with golden trim at the bodice and sleeves.

"The finest Duchess of the court could not match your beauty."

She smiled at his flattery. "I thank you, husband." She spun, showing off the gown. "Your Duke Caldric is the true magician, I am thinking. How his staff could manage to find all these things and have them ready in two short hours is true magic." She patted at the full skirt. "These heavy gowns will take some practice getting around in. I think I prefer the short robes of home." She stroked the material. "Still, this is a lovely cloth. And in this cold world of yours, I can see the need." The weather had turned cooler, now that summer was waning. In less than two months snow would begin falling.

"Wait until winter, Katala, if you think it's cold now."

William came running into the room, from the bedroom that adjoined their own. "Mama, Papa," he yelled in boyish exuberance. He was dressed in a tunic and trousers befitting a little noble, of fine material and workmanship. He leaped into his father's outstretched arms.

"Where are you going?" he asked with a wide-eyed look.

Pug said, "We go to see Lyam made King, William. While we are gone, you mind the nurse and don't tease Fantus."

He said he would and wouldn't, respectively, but his impish grin put his credibility in doubt. The maid who was to act as William's nurse entered and took the boy in tow, leading him back into his own room'.

Pug and Katala left the suite Caldric had given them and walked toward the throne room. As they turned a corner, they saw Laurie leaving his room, with Kasumi standing nervously to one side.

Laurie brightened upon seeing them and said, "Ah! There you are. I was hoping we'd see you two before all the ceremonies had begun."

Kasumi bowed to Pug, though the magician now wore a fashionable russet-colored tunic and trousers in place of his black robe. "

"Great One," he said.

"That is a thing of the past here, Kasumi. Please call me Pug."

"You two look so handsome in your new clothes and uniform, said Katala. Laurie wore bright clothing in the latest fashion, a yellow tunic with a sleeveless overjacket of green, and tight-fitting black trousers tucked into high boots. Kasumi wore the uniform of a Knight-Captain of the LaMutian garrison, deep green tunic and trousers, and the grey wolfs-head tabard of LaMut.

The minstrel smiled at her. ~'In all the excitement of the last few months, I had forgotten I had a small fortune in gems with me. Since I cannot conspire to return them to the Lord of the Shinzawai, and his son refuses to take them, I suppose they are mine by rights. I will no longer have to worry about finding a widow with an inn."

Pug said, "Kasumi, how goes it with your men?"

'Well enough, though there is still some discomfort between them and the LaMutian soldiers. It should pass in time. We had an encounter with the Brotherhood the week after we left. They can fight, but we routed them. There was much celebrating among all the men in the garrisons, both Tsurani and LaMutian. It was a good beginning."

It had been more than an encounter. Word had reached Rillanon of the battle. The Dark Brothers and their goblin allies had raided into Yabbon, overrunning one of the border garrisons, weakened during the war. The Tsurani had turned from their march to ZUn, dashed northward, and relieved the garrison. The Tsurani had fought like madmen to save their former enemies from the larger goblin host, which they had driven back into the mountains north of Yabon.

Laurie winked at Pug. "Having made something of heroes of themselves, our Tsurani friends were given quite a welcome when they arrived here in Rillanon.' Being distant from the centre of the war, the city's citizens felt little fear or hatred towards their former enemies, giving them a welcome that would have been unimaginable in the Free Cities, in Yabon, or along the Far Coast. "I think Kasumi's men were a little overcome by it all.' "In truth they were,' agreed Kasumi. 'Such a reception on our home-world would have been unlikely, but here . . . '

'Still,' continued Laurie, 'they seemed to take it in their stride. The men have developed a rapid appreciation for Kingdom wines and ale, and they've managed to overcome their distaste for tall women.'

Kasumi looked away with an embarrassed smile on his face. Laurie said, 'Our dashing Knight-Captain was quipped a week ago by one of the richer merchant families one seeking to develop broader trade with the West. He has since been seen in the company of a certain merchant's daughter.'

Katala laughed and Pug smiled at Kasumi's embarrassment.

Pug said, 'He was always a quick student.'

Kasumi lowered his head, cheeks flushed, but grinning broadly. 'Still, it is a hard thing learning that your countrywomen have such freedom.

Now I see why you two were always so strong-willed. You must have learned from your mothers."

Laurie's attention was diverted by someone approaching. Pug noticed a look of open admiration upon the singer's face. The magician turned and was greeted by the sight of a beautiful young woman approaching with a guard escort. Pug's eyes widened as he recognized Carline. She was as lovely a woman as her girlhood had promised. She came up to them and with a wave of her hand dismissed the guard. She looked regal in a fine green gown, with a pearl-studded tiara crowning her dark hair. "Master magician," she said, "have you no greeting for an old friend?"

Pug bowed before the Princess, and Kasumi and Laurie did also.

Katala curtsied as she had been shown by one of the maids. Pug said, "Princess, you flatter me by remembering a simple keep boy."

Carline smiled, with a gleam in her blue eyes. "Oh, Pug . . . you were never a simple anything." She looked past him to Katala. "Is this

your wife?" When he nodded and introduced them, the Princess kissed Katala's cheek and said, "My dear, I had heard you were lovely, but the reports my brother gave did you little justice."

Katala said, "Your Highness is gracious."

Kasumi had returned to his nervous posture, but Laurie stood unable to take his eyes from the young woman in green. Katala had to grip his arm firmly to recapture his attention. "Laurie, will you show Kasumi and me about the palace a little, before the ceremonies begin?"

Laurie smiled broadly, bowed to the Princess, and accompanied Kasumi and Katala down the hallway. Pug and the Princess watched their retreating backs.

Carline said, "Your wife is a most perceptive woman."

Pug smiled. "She is indeed remarkable."

Carline looked genuinely glad to see him. "I understand you also have a son."

"William. He is a little devil, and a treasure."

There was a trace of envy in Carline's expression. "I would like to meet him." She paused, then added, "You've been most fortunate."

"Most fortunate, Highness."

She took his arm and they slowly started to walk. "So formal, Pug? Or should I call you Milamber, as I have heard you were known?"

He saw her smile and returned it. "I sometimes don't know, though here Pug seems more proper." He grinned. "You seem to have learned a great deal about me."

She feigned a small pout. "You were always my favorite magician."

They shared a laugh. Then, lowering his voice, Pug said, "I am so very sorry about your father's death, Carline."

She clouded a little. "Lyam told me you were there at the last. I am glad he saw you safely back before he died. Did you know how much he cared for you?"

Pug felt himself flush with emotion. "He gave me a name, there is little more he could have done to show me. Did you know that?"

She brightened. "Yes, Lyam also told me that. We're cousins of sorts," she said with a laugh. As they walked, she spoke softly. "You were my first love, Pug, but even more, you were always my friend. And I am pleased to see my friend once more home."

He stopped and kissed her lightly upon the cheek. "And your friend is most pleased to be home."

Blushing slightly, she led him to a small garden on a terrace. They walked out into bright sunlight and sat upon a stone bench. Carline let out a long sigh. "I only wish Father and Roland could be here."

Pug said, "I was also grieved to hear of Roland's death."

She shook her head. "That jester lived as much in his few years as most men do in their entire lives. He hid much behind his raffish ways, but do you know, I think he may have been one of the wisest men I'll ever know. He took every passing minute and squeezed all the life from it he could." Pug studied her face and saw her eyes were bright with memory. "Had he lived, I would have married him. I

suspect we would have fought every day, Pug, oh, how he could make me' angry. But he could make me laugh as well.

He taught me so very much about living. I shall always



treasure his memory.'

'I am pleased you are at peace with your losses, Carline  
So many years a slave, then a magician, in another land  
have changed me much. It seems you have greatly  
changed as well.'

She tilted her head to look at him. "I don't think you've changed all that much, Pug. There's still some of the boy in you, the one who was so baffled by my attentions."

Pug laughed. "I guess you're right. And in some ways you are also unchanged, or at least you still have the knack of rattling men if friend Laurie's reaction is any measure."

She smiled at him, her face radiant, and Pug knew a faint tugging, an echo of what he had felt when he was a boy. But now there was no discomfort, for he knew he would always love Carline, though not in the way he had imagined as a boy. More than any tumultuous passion, or the deep bond he had with Katala, he knew what he felt was affection and friendship.

She pursued his last comment. "That beautiful blond man who was with you a few minutes ago? Who is he?"

Pug smiled knowingly. "Your most devoted subject, from all appearances.

He is Laurie, a troubadour from Tyr-Sog, and a rascal of limitless wit and charm. He has a loving heart and a brave spirit, and is a true friend. I'll tell you sometime of how he saved my life at peril of his own."

Carline again cocked her head to one side. "He sounds a most intriguing fellow." Pug could see that while she was older and more self-possessed and had known sorrow, much about her remained unchanged.

"I once, in jest, promised him an introduction to you. Now I am sure he would be most delighted to make Your Highness's acquaintance."  
"Then we must arrange it." She rose. "I fear I must go make ready for the coronation. Any time now the bells will sound and the priests will arrive. We shall speak again, Pug."

Pug came to his feet as well. "I shall enjoy it, Carline."

He presented his arm. A voice from behind said, "Squire Pug, may I speak with you."

They turned around and found Martin Longbow standing some distance away, farther back in the garden. He bowed to the Princess. Carline said, "Master Longbow! There you are. I've not seen you since yesterday."

Martin smiled slightly. "I've had a need to be alone. In Crydee when such a mood strikes, I return to the forest. Here"-he indicated the large terraced garden-"this was the best I could manage."

She looked quizzically at him, but shrugged off the remark. "Well, I expect you will manage to attend the coronation. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must be off." She accepted their polite good-byes and left.

Looking at Pug, Martin said, "It is good to see you once again, Pug."

"And you, Martin. Of all my old friends here, you are the last to greet me. except for those still in Crydee I've yet to see, you've made my homecoming complete." Pug could see Martin was troubled. "Is something wrong?"

Martin looked out over the garden, toward the city and sea beyond.

"Lyam told me, Pug. He told me you know as well."

Pug understood at once. "I was there when your father died, Martin," " he said, his voice remaining calm.

In silence Martin began to walk, and when he came to the low stone wall around the garden he gripped it hard. "My father," he said, bitterly.:-

"How many years I waited for him to say, 'Martin, I am your father.'"

He swallowed hard. "I never cared for inheritance and such things. I was' content to remain Huntmaster of Crydee. If only he had told me himself."

Pug thought over his next words. "Martin, many men do things they regret later. Only a few are granted the opportunity to make amends. Had a Tsurani arrow taken him quickly, had a hundred other things come to pass, he might not have had the chance to do what little he did."

"I know, but still that is cold comfort."

"Did Lyam tell you his last words? He said, 'Martin is your brother. I have wronged him, Lyam. He is a good man, and well do I love him.'"

Martin's knuckles turned white gripping the stone wall. Quietly he replied, "No, he did not."

"~ "Lord Borric was not a simple man, Martin, and I was only a boy when I knew him, but whatever else may be said of him, there was no meanness of spirit in the man. I don't pretend to understand why he acted as he did, but that he loved you is certain."

"It was all such folly. I knew he was my father, and he never knew I ""had been told by Mother. What difference in our lives had I gone to him and proclaimed myself?"

"Only the gods might know." He reached out and touched Martin's arm. "What matters now is what you will do. That Lyam told you means he will make public your birthright. If he's already told others, the court will be in an uproar. You are the eldest and have the right of first claim. Do you know what you will do?"

Studying Pug, Martin said, "You speak calmly enough of this. Doesn't my claim to the throne disturb you at all?"

Pug shook his head. "You would have no way of knowing, but I was counted among the most powerful men in Tsuranuanni. My word was in some ways more important than any king's command. I think I know what power can do, and what sort of men seek it. I doubt you have much personal ambition as such, unless you've changed a great deal since I lived in Crydee. If you take the crown, it will be for what you believe are good reasons. It may be the only way to prevent civil war, for should you choose the mantle of King, Lyam will be the first to swear fealty. Whatever the reason, you would do your best to act wisely. And if you take the purple, you will do your best to be a good ruler."

Martin looked impressed. "You have changed much, Squire Pug, more than I would have expected. I thank you for your kind judgment of me, but I think you are the only man in the Kingdom who would believe such."

"Whatever the truth may be, you are your father's son and would not bring dishonor upon his house."

Again Martin's words were tinged with bitterness. "There are those

who will judge my birth itself a dishonor." He looked out over the city below, then turned to stare at Pug. "If only the choice were simple, but Lyam's seen that it is not. If I take the crown, many will balk. If I renounce in Lyam's favor, some may use me as an excuse to refuse Lyam their allegiance.

"Gods above, Pug. Were the issue between Arutha and myself, I would not hesitate for an instant to stand aside in his favor. But Lyam? I've not seen him for seven years, and those years have changed him. He seems a man beset with doubts. An able field commander, no question, but a king? I am faced with the fearful prospect I would prove a more able king."

Pug spoke softly. "As I have said, should you claim the throne, you will do so for what you judge good reasons, reasons of duty."

Martin's right hand closed into a fist, held before his face. "Where ends duty and begins personal ambition? Where ends justice and begins revenge? There is a part of me, an angry part of me, that says, 'Wring all you can from this moment, Martin.' Why not King Martin? And then another part of me wonders if Father may have placed this upon me knowing someday I must be King. Oh, Pug, what is my duty?"

"That is something each of us must judge for himself alone. I can offer you no counsel."

Martin leaned forward upon the rail, hands covering his face. "I think I would like to be alone for a time, if you do not mind."

Pug left, knowing a troubled man considered his fate. And the fate of the Kingdom.

Pug found Katala with Laurie and Kasumi, speaking with Duke Brucal and Earl Vandros. As he approached, he could hear the Duke saying, "So we'll finally have a wedding, now that this young slow-wit"-he indicated Vandros-"has asked for my daughter's hand. Maybe I'll have some grandchildren before I die, after all. See what comes of waiting so many years to marry. You're old before your children marry." He inclined his head when he saw Pug. "Ah, magician, there you are."

Katala smiled when she saw her husband. "Did you and the Princess have a nice reunion?"

"Very nice."

Prodding him in the chest with her forefinger, she said, "And when we're alone, you'll repeat every single word."

The others laughed at Pug's embarrassment, though he could see she was only having fun with him.

Brucal said, "Ah, magician, your wife is so lovely, I wish I were sixty again." He winked at Pug. "Then I'd steal her from you, and damn the scandal." He took Pug by the arm and said to Katala, "If you'll forgive me, lady, instead I'll have to steal a moment of your husband's time." He steered Pug away from the surprised group and when they were out of earshot said, "I have grave news."

"I know."

"Lyam is a fool, a noble fool." He looked away for a moment, his eyes flitting over with memory. "But he is his father's son, and his grandfather's grandson as well, and like both before him has a strong sense of honor." The old eyes came into sharp focus again. "Still, I wish

his sense of duty were as clear." Lowering his voice even more, he said, "Keep your wife close about. The guards in the hall wear the purple and will die defending the King, whoever he may be. But it may get messy. Many of the eastern lords are impulsive men, overly used to having their petty demands instantly gratified. A few might open their mouths and find themselves chewing steel.

"My men and Vandros's are positioned throughout the palace, while Kasumi's Tsurani are outside, at Lyam's request. The eastern lords don't like it, but Lyam is Heir, and they cannot say no. With those who will stand with us, we can seize the palace and hold it.

"With du Bas-Tyra hiding, and Richard of Salador dead, the eastern lords have lost their leadership. But there are enough of them on the island, with enough of their 'honor guards' in and around the city, to turn this island into a pretty battleground should they flee the palace before a king is named. No, we'll hold the palace. No traitorous easterner will leave to plot treason with Black Guy. Each one will bend a knee before whichever brother takes the crown."

Pug was surprised by this. "You'll support Martin, then?"

Old Brucal's voice became harsh, though he kept it low. "No one will plunge my Kingdom into civil war, magician. Not while I have a breath left to spend. Arutha and I have spoken. Neither of us likes the choices, but we are clear on our course. Should Martin be King, all will bow before him. Should Lyam take the crown, Martin will swear fealty or not leave the palace alive. Should the crown be broken, we hold this palace, and no lord leaves until a congress has named one brother King, even if we're a year in that bloody damned hall. We've already picked up several of Guy's agents in the city. He's here in Rillanon, there's no doubt. If even a handful of nobles can win free of the palace before a congress is convened, we have civil war." He struck his fist into his open hand.

"Damn these traditions. As we speak, the priests walk toward the palace, each step bringing them closer to the moment of choice. If only Lyam had acted sooner, given us more time, or not acted at all. Or if we could have caged Guy. If we could have spoken to Martin, but he's vanished. . . ."

"I've spoken to Martin."

Brucal's eyes narrowed. "What is his mood? What are his plans?"

"He's a troubled man, as well you might imagine. To have all this put upon him with scant time to adjust. He has always known who his father was, and was resigned to take the secret with him to the grave, I'll wager, but now he is suddenly thrust into the heart of the matter. I don't know what he will do. I don't think he'll know, until the priests put the crown before him."

Brucal stroked his chin. "That he knew and tried not to use that knowledge for his own gain speaks well of him. But there's still no time." He indicated the group by the main door to the hall. "You'd best be back to your wife. Keep your wits sharp, magician, for we may have need of your arts before this day is through."

They returned to the others, and Brucal led Vandros and Kasumi inside, speaking with them in low tones. Before Katala could speak, Laurie said, "What is afoot? When I took Katala and Kasumi outside to a balcony overlooking the courtyard, I saw Kasumi's men everywhere.

For a moment I thought the Empire had won the war. I couldn't get a thing from him."

Pug said, "Brucal knows they can be trusted to follow Kasumi's orders without question."

Katala said, "What is this, husband? Trouble?"

"There is little time to explain. There may be more than one claimant to the crown. Stay near Kasumi, Laurie, and keep your sword loose. If there's trouble, follow Arutha's lead."

Laurie nodded, his face set in a grim expression of understanding. He entered the hall, and Katala said, "William?"

"He is safe. If there is trouble it will be in the great hall, not in the guest quarters. It will be afterward the true grief will begin." Her expression showed she didn't understand fully, but she quietly accepted what he said. "Come, we must take our places inside."

They hurried into the great hall, to a place of honor near the front. As they passed by the throng gathered to see the King crowned, they could hear the buzz of voices as rumor swept the room. They came up to Kulgan, and the stout magician nodded greeting. Meecham waited a few paces behind, his back to a wall. His eyes surveyed the room, marking the positions of all within a sword's length of Kulgan. Pug noticed the old, long-bladed hunter's knife was loose in its scabbard. He might not know what the problem was, but he would be instantly ready to protect his old companion.

Kulgan hissed, "What is going on? Everything was calm until a few minutes ago, now the room is abuz." '

Pug leaned his head closer to Kulgan's and said, 'Martin may announce for the crown.'

Kulgan's eyes widened. 'Gods and fishes. that'll set this court on its ear.' He looked around and saw most of the Kingdom's nobles had taken their places within the hall.

With a sigh of regret he said, 'it's too late to do anything now but wait.'

AMos cRASHED THROUGH the garden, swearing furiously. "Why the hell does anyone want all these bloody posies about anyway?"

Martin looked up and barely caught the crystal goblet thrust at him by Amos Trask. "What-" he said, as Amos filled it with wine from a crystal decanter he held.

"Thought you might be in need of a bracer, and a shipmate to share it with."

Martin's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Amos filled his own goblet and took a long pull. "It's all over the palace now, fellow-me-lad. Lyam's a good enough sort, but he's got rocks for ballast if he thinks he can have a crew of stonemasons put your name on your father's tomb, then hush them up with something as petty as a royal command. Every servant in the palace knew you were the new first mate within an hour after those boys finished work. It's all up in the wind, you can believe me."

Martin drank the wine and said, "Thank you, Amos." He studied the deep red wine in the glass. "Shall I be King?"

Amos laughed, a good-natured, hearty sound. "I have two thoughts

on that, Martin. First, it's always better to be captain than deckhand, which is why I'm a captain and not a deckhand. Second, there's some difference between a ship and a kingdom."

Martin laughed. "Pirate, you're no help at all."

Amos looked stung. "Blast me, I got you to laugh, didn't I?" He leaned over, resting an elbow on the garden wall while he poured more wine into his cup. "See here, there's this pretty little three-master in the royal harbor. I've not had much time, but with the King's pardon being declared, there's plenty of good lads fresh from the brig who'd jump to sail with Captain Trenchard. Why don't we cast off from here and go a'roving?"

Martin shook his head. "That sounds fine. I've been on a ship three times in my life, and with you I nearly got killed all three times."

Amos looked injured. "The first two times were Arutha's fault, and the third time wasn't my fault. I didn't send those Ceresian pirates to chase us from Salador to Rillanon. Besides, if you sign aboard with me', we'll do the chasing. The Kingdom Sea's a whole new sea for Trenchard to sail. What do you say?"

Martin's voice turned somber. "No, Amos, though I'd almost as soon sail with you as return to the forest. But what I must decide cannot be run from. For good or ill, I am the eldest son, and I have the first claim to the crown." Martin looked hard at Amos. "Do you think Lyam can be King?"

Amos shook his head. "Of course, but that's not the question, is it? What you want to know is, can Lyam be a good King? I don't know, Martin. But I'll tell you one thing. I've seen many a sailor gone pale with fear in battle, yet fight without hesitation. Sometimes you can't know what a man's capable of until the time comes for him to act." Amos paused for a moment, considering his words. "Lyam's a good enough sort, as I said. He's scared silly of becoming King, and I don't blame him. But once upon the throne . . . I think he could be a good enough King."

"I wish I could know you were right."

A chime sounded, then great bells began to ring. "Well," said Amos, "you don't have much time left to decide. The Priests of Ishop are at the outer gates, and when they reach the throne room, there's no cutting grapples and sailing away. Your course will be set."

Martin turned away from the wall. "Thank you for your company, Amos, and the wine. Shall we go change the fate of the Kingdom?"

Amos drank the last of the wine from the crystal decanter. He tossed it aside and over the sound of shattering glass said, "You go decide the fate of the Kingdom, Martin. I'll come along later, perhaps, if I can't arrange for that little ship I spoke of. Maybe we'll sail together again. If you change your mind about being King, or decide you're in need of quick transportation from Rillanon, fetch yourself down to the docks before sundown. I'll be about somewhere, and you'll always be welcome in my crew." Martin gripped his hand tightly. "Always fare well, pirate."

Amos left and Martin stood alone, ordering his thoughts as best he could, then, making his decision, he began his journey to the throne room.

By craning his neck, Pug could see those entering the great

hall. Duke Caldric escorted Erland's widow, Princess Alicia, down the long aisle towards the throne. Anita and Carline followed. From Kulgan came the observation, 'By those grim expressions and pale complexions, I wager Arutha has told them what may come.'

Pug noticed how Anita held tightly to Carline's hand when they reached their appointed places. "What a thing, to discover you've an elder brother in these circumstances.' Kulgan whispered, 'They all seem to be taking it well enough.'

Gongs announced the Ishapian priests had entered the anteroom, and Arutha and Lyam entered. Both wore the red mantles of Princes of the Realm and walked quickly to the front of the hall. Arutha's eyes darted around the room, as if trying to judge the temper of those on all sides. Lyam looked calm, as if somehow resigned to accept whatever fate brought.

Pug saw Arutha whisper a short word to Fannon, and the old Swordmaster in turn spoke to Sergeant Cardan. Both looked about tensely, hands near sword hilts, watching everyone in the room.

Pug could see no sign of Martin. He whispered to Kulgan, 'Perhaps Martin has decided to avoid the issue.'

Kulgan looked about. 'No, there he is  
Pug saw where Kulgan indicated with a bob of his head.

By the far wall, near a corner, a giant column rose. Standing deep within its shadow was Martin. His features were hidden, but his stance was unmistakable.

Bells began to chime, and Pug looked to see the first of the Ishapian priests entering the great hall. Behind, others followed, all walking in unison at the same measured pace. From the side doors came the sound of bolts being driven into place, for the hall traditionally was sealed from the start of the ceremony to its end.

When sixteen priests had entered the room, the great doors were closed behind. The last priest paused before the doors, a heavy wooden staff in one hand and a large wax seal in the other. Quickly he affixed the seal to the doors. Pug could see that the seal bore the seven-sided device of Ishap inscribed upon it, and felt the presence of magic within it. He knew the doors could not be opened save by the one who affixed the seal, or by another of high arts and then at great risk.

When the doors were sealed, the priest with the staff walked forward between the lines of his brother priests who waited, incanting soft prayers. One held the new crown, fashioned by the priests, resting upon a cushion of purple velvet. Rodric's crown had been destroyed by the blow that had ended his life, but had it survived, according to custom it would have been interred with him. Should no new King be crowned today, this new crown would be

smashed upon the stones of the floor, and no new one made until the Congress of Lords informed the priests they had elected a new King. Pug marvelled how much importance could be attached to such a simple circlet of gold.

The priests

moved forward, to stand before the throne.

where other priests of the lesser orders were already waiting. As was the custom, Lyam had been asked if he wished his family priest to officiate at the investiture, and he had agreed. Father Tully stood at the head of the delegation from the temple of Astalon. Pug knew the old priest would be quick to take charge of things without question, regardless of which of Borric's sons took the crown, and counted it a wise choice.

The chief Ishapian priest struck his staff upon the floor, sixteen even, measured blows. The sound rang through the hall, and when he was done, the throne room was silent. 'We come to crown the King !' exclaimed the head priest . 'ishap bless the King!' answered the other priests.

'in the name of Ishap, the one god over all, and in the name of the four greater and twelve lesser gods, let all who have claim to the crown come forth.'

Pug found himself holding his breath as he saw Lyam and Arutha come to stand before the priests. A moment later, Martin stepped from the shadows and walked forward. As Martin came into view there was a hissing of intaken breath, for many in the hall had either not heard the rumour or not believed it.

When all three were before the priest, he struck the floor with the heavy staff. "Now is the hour and here is the place . ' He then touched Martin upon the shoulder with his staff resting it there as he said, "By what right do you come before us?'

Martin spoke in a clear, strong voice. "By the right of birth.' Pug could feel the presence of magic. The priests were not leaving the claims to the throne subject to honour and tradition alone. Touched by the staff, no one could bear false witness.

The same procedure was repeated and the same answer given by Lyam and Arutha.

the priest asked, "State your name and your claim.'

Again the staff rested upon Martin's shoulder as Martin's voice rang out. 'I am Martin, eldest son of Borric, eldest of the royal blood.'

A slight buzzing ran through the hall, silenced by the priest's staff striking the floor. The staff was placed upon Lyam's shoulder, and he answered, "I am Lyam, son of



Borric, of the royal blood.

A few voices could be heard saying, "The Heir!"

The priest hesitated

then repeated the question to Arutha, who answered

'I am Arutha, son of Borric, of  
the royal blood . '

The priest looked at the three young men, then to Lyam

said, 'Are you the acknowledged Heir?'

Lyam answered with the staff resting upon his shoulder.

"The right of succession was given to me in ignorance of

Martin. It is a false bequest, for Rodric thought me the  
eldest conDoin male.'

The priest removed the staff and conferred with his  
fellow priests. The hall remained silent as the priests  
gathered together to discuss the unforeseen turn of  
events. Time passed tortuously, until at last the chief  
priest turned once more to face them. He surrendered his  
staff and was handed the golden circle that was the crown  
of the Kingdom. He uttered a brief prayer. "Ishap, give all  
before us in this matter guidance and wisdom. Let the  
appointed one do right.' In a strong voice he said, 'That  
the succession is flawed is clear.' He placed the crown  
before Martin. "Martin, as eldest son of the royal blood  
you have the right of first claim. Will you, Martin, take up  
this burden, and will you be our King?'

Martin looked at the crown. Silence hung heavy in the  
room as every eye was fixed upon the tall man in green.  
Breath was held as the throng in the hall waited upon his  
answer.

Then Martin slowly reached out and took the crown  
from the cushion upon which it rested. He raised it up,  
and every gaze in the room followed it, as it caught a ray  
of light entering through a high window, scattering glittering  
glory throughout the hall.

Holding it above his head, he said, "I, Martin, do  
hereby abdicate my claim to the crown of the Kingdom of  
the Isles, for now and forever, on my own behalf and on  
behalf of all my issue from now henceforth to the last  
generation.' He moved suddenly and the crown rested  
upon Lyam's brow. Martin's voice rang out once more, his  
words a defiant challenge. 'All hail Lyam! True and  
undoubted King!'

There was a pause, as those in the hall took in what they  
had seen. Then Arutha faced a stunned, silent crowd, and  
his voice filled the air. 'Hail Lyam! True and undoubted  
King!'

Lyam stood flanked by his brothers, one to each side,  
and the hall erupted into shouts and cheers. 'Hail Lyam!  
Hail the King!'

The chief priest let the shouting continue for a time,

then recovered his staff and struck the floor, bringing silence. He looked at Lyam and said, "Will you, Lyam, take up this burden and be our King?"

Looking at the priest, Lyam answered, "I will be your King."

Again the room sounded with cheers and the chief priest let the din go unchecked. Pug looked and saw relief on the faces of many, Brucal, Caldric, Fannon, Vandros and Cardan, all who had stood ready to face trouble.

Again the head priest silenced the room with the striking of his staff. "Tully of the order of Astalon," he called and the old family priest stepped forward.

Other priests removed Lyam's red mantle, replacing it with the purple mantle of kingship. The priests stepped away and Tully came before Lyam. To Martin and Arutha he said, "All in the Kingdom thank you for your forbearance and wisdom." The brothers left Lyam's side and returned to stand with Anita and Carline.

Carline smiled warmly at Martin, took his hand, and whispered, "Thank you, Martin."

Tully faced the crowd and intoned, "Now is the hour and here is the place. We are here to witness the coronation of His Majesty, Lyam, first of that name, as our true King. Is there any here who challenge his right?"

Several eastern lords looked unhappy, but no objection was raised. Tully again faced Lyam, who went on his knees before the priest. Tully placed his hand upon Lyam's head. "Now is the hour and here is the place. It is to you this burden has fallen, Lyam, first of that name, son of Borric, of the conDoin line of Kings. Will you take up this burden and will you be our King?"

Lyam answered, "I will be your King."

Tully removed his hand from Lyam's head and reached down to take his hand, gripping the royal signet upon it.

"Now is the hour and here is the place. Do you, Lyam conDoin, son of Borric, of the line of Kings, swear to defend and protect the Kingdom of the Isles, faithfully serving her people, to provide for their welfare, and prosperity?"

"I, Lyam, do so swear and avow."

Tully began a long liturgy, then when the prayers were done, Lyam rose. Tully removed his ritual mitre and handed it to the head priest of Ishap, who passed it along to another of Tully's order. Tully knelt before Lyam and kissed his signet. He then rose and escorted Lyam to the throne, while the ishapien priest incanted, "Ishap bless the King." Lyam sat. An ancient sword, once carried by Dannis,

the first conDoin King, was brought to him and rested across his knees, a sign he would defend the Kingdom with his life.

Tully turned and nodded to the chief priest of Ishop, who struck the floor with his staff. "Now it is past, the hour of our choosing. I hereby proclaim Lyam the First our right, true, and undisputed King."

The crowd responded with a roar. "Hail Lyam! Long live the King!"

The Priests of Ishop chanted low and the chief priest led them to the door. He struck the wax seal with his staff, and it split with a cracking sound. He struck the door three times more, and the guards outside opened it. Before stepping out, he intoned the last phrase of the ritual of coronation. To those outside the hall, not privileged to watch the ceremony, he announced, "Let the word go forth. Lyam is our King!"

Faster than a bird's flight, the word went out of the hall, through the palace, and into the city. Celebrants in the street toasted the new monarch, and not one in a thousand knew how close disaster had come to visiting the Kingdom that day.

The Ishopian priests left the hall and all eyes returned to the new ruler of the Kingdom.

Tully motioned to the members of the royal family, and Arutha, Martin, and Carline came before their brother. Lyam extended his hand and Martin knelt and kissed his brother's signet. Arutha followed, then Carline.

Alicia led Anita to the throne, the first of the long line of nobles who followed, and the lengthy business of accepting the fealty of the peers of the realm began. Lord Caldric bent a trembling knee to his King, and there were tears of relief upon his face as he rose. When Brucal swore his loyalty, he briefly spoke to the King as he stood, and Lyam nodded.

Then in turn came the other nobles of the Kingdom until, hours later, the last of the Border Barons, those guardians of the Northern Marches, vassal to no Lord but the King, rose and returned to stand with the others in the hall.

Handing the sword of Dannis to a waiting page, Lyam stood and said, "It is our wish that a time of celebration be at hand. But there are matters of state that must be attended to at once. Most are of a happy nature, but first there is one sad duty which must be discharged.

"There is one absent today, one who sought to gain the throne upon which we are privileged to sit. That Guy du Bas-Tyra did plot treason cannot be denied. That he did commit foul murder is unquestioned. But it was the late King's wish that mercy be shown in this matter. As it was Rodric's dying request, I shall grant this boon, though it would be our pleasure to see Guy du Bas-Tyra pay in full for his deeds.

"Let the word go from this day that Guy du Bas-Tyra is

named outlaw and banished from our Kingdom, his titles and lands forfeit to the crown. Let his name and arms be stricken from the role of the Lords of the Kingdom. Let no man offer him shelter, fire, food or water.' To the assembled Lords he added, "Some here have been allied with the former Duke, so we have little doubt he will hear our judgment. Tell him to flee, to go to Kesh, Queg, or Roldem. Tell him to hide in the Northlands if no other will take him, but should he be found within our borders within a week's time, his life is forfeit.'

No one in the hall spoke for a moment, then Lyam said, 'it has been a time of great sorrow and suffering in our realms; now let us embark upon a new era, one of peace and prosperity.' He indicated that his two brothers should return to his side, and as they approached, Arutha looked at Martin. Suddenly he grinned and, in an unexpected display of emotion, hugged both Martin and Lyam. For a brief instant all in the hall were silent as the three brothers clung closely to one another, then again cheers filled the room. While the clamour continued, Lyam spoke to his brothers. At first Martin smiled broadly, then suddenly his expression changed. Both Arutha and Lyam nodded vigorously, but Martin's face drained of colour. He started to say something, his manner intense and remonstrative Lyam cut him off and held up his hand for silence.

'There is a new ordering of things in our Kingdom. Let it be known that from this day forward, our beloved brother Arutha is Prince of Krondor, and until such time as there is a son in our house, heir to the throne.' At the last, Arutha seemed less than pleased. Then Lyam said, "And it is our wish that the Duchy of Crydee, home of

our father, stay within our family so long as his line remains. To this end I name Martin, our beloved brother, Duke of Crydee, with all lands, titles, and rights pertaining thereunto . '

A cheer again rose from the crowd. Martin and Arutha left Lyam's side and the new King said, 'Let the Earl of LaMut and Knight-Captain Kasumi of LaMut approach the throne.'

Kasumi and Vandros started. Kasumi had been nervous all day, for Vandros had placed a great trust in him. His Tsurani impassivity asserted itself and he fell in beside Vandros as he reached the throne.

Both men knelt before Lyam, who said, "My Lord Brucal has asked us to make this happy announcement. His vassal the Earl Vandros will wed his daughter, the Lady Felinah.'

From the crowd, Brucal's voice could be heard saying, 'And it's about time.' Several of the older courtiers from Rodric's court blanched, but Lyam joined in the general

laughter.

"It is also the Duke's wish that he be allowed to retire to

his estates, where he may seek the rewards of a long and useful service to his Kingdom. We have given consent. And as he has no son, it is also his wish that his title pass to one able to continue in the service of the Kingdom, one who has shown uncommon ability in commanding the LaMutian garrison of the Armies of the West during the late conflict. For his many brave actions and his faithful service, we hereby approve his marriage, and are pleased to name Vandros Duke of Yabon, with all lands, titles, and rights pertaining thereunto. Rise, Lord Vandros.'

Vandros rose, a little shaken, then returned to the side of his father-in-law to be. Brucal struck him a friendly blow on the back and gripped his hand. Lyam turned his attention to Kasumi and smiled. "There is one here before us who was recently counted our enemy. He is now counted as our loyal subject. Kasumi of the Shinzawai, for your efforts to bring peace to two warring worlds, and your wisdom and courage in the defence of our lands against the Brotherhood of the Dark Path, we give to you command of the garrison of LaMut, and name you Earl of LaMut, with all lands, titles, and rights pertaining thereunto. Rise, Earl Kasumi.'

Kasumi was speechless. He slowly reached out and took the King's hand, as he had seen the other nobles do, and kissed the signet. To the King he said, "My lord King, my life and my honour do I pledge.'

Lyam said, 'My lord Vandros, do you accept Earl Kasumi as your vassal?'

Vandros grinned. 'Happily, Sire.'

Kasumi rejoined Vandros, his eyes illuminated by pride.

Brucal administered another hearty slap on the back.

Several more offices were given, for there were vacancies from the intrigues of Rodric's court and from deaths in the war. When it seemed all business was over, Lyam said, 'Let Squire Pug of Crydee approach the throne.'

Pug looked at Katala and Kulgan, surprised at being called. 'What?'

'Go and find out Kulgan pushed him forward

Pug came before Lyam and bowed. The King said,

'What has been done was a private matter, between our father and this man. Now it is our wish all in our realm know that this man, once called Pug the orphan of Crydee, has had his name inscribed upon the rolls of our family.' He held out his hand, and Pug knelt before him.

Lyam presented his signet and then took Pug by the shoulders and bade him rise. 'As it was our father's wish, so it is ours. From this day let all in our Kingdom know this man is Pug conDoin, member of the King's family.'

Many in the hall were surprised by Pug's adoption and elevation, but those who knew of his exploits cheered lustily as Lyam said, "Behold our cousin Pug, Prince of the Realm."

Katala ignored all propriety and ran forward to embrace her husband. Several of the eastern lords frowned, but Lyam laughed and kissed her upon the cheek.

'Come.' Lyam cried. "It is now time for celebration. Let the dancers, musicians, and tumblers come forth. Let tables be brought and food and wine be placed upon them. Let merriment reign!"

The festivities continued. Celebration had run unchecked throughout the afternoon. A herald next to the King's table read messages to the King from those unable to attend, many nobles and the King of Queg, as well as monarchs of the small kingdoms of the eastern shores. Important merchants and Guildmasters from the Free Cities also sent congratulations. There were also messages from Aglaranna and Tomas, and from the dwarves of the West at Stone Mountain and the Grey Towers. Old King Halfdan, ruler of the dwarves of the East in Dorgin, sent his best wishes, and even Great Kesh had sent greetings, with a request for more meetings to settle peacefully the issue of the Vale of Dreams. The message was personally signed by the Empress.

Hearing the last message, Lyam said to Arutha, "For Kesh to have sent us a personal message in so short a time, the Empress must boast the most gifted spies in Midkemia.

'You'll have to keep your wits about you in Krondor.'

Arutha sighed, not happy at that prospect. Pug, Laurie, Meecham, Cardan, Kulgan, Fannon and Kasumi all sat at the royal table. Lyam had insisted they join the royal family. The new Earl of LaMut still seemed in shock at his office, but his happiness was clearly showing, and even in this noisy hall the sound of his warriors outside singing Tsurani songs of celebration could be faintly heard. Pug mused over the discomfort that must be causing the royal porters and pages.

Katala joined her husband, reporting their son napping, and Fantus as well, exhausted from play. Katala said to Kulgan, 'I hope your pet will be able to withstand such constant aggravation.'

Kulgan laughed. "Fantus thrives on the attention."

Pug said, 'With all those rewards being passed out, Kulgan, I'm surprised there was no mention of you.

You've given faithful service to the King's family as long as anyone save Tully and Fannon.'

Kulgan snorted. 'Tully, Fannon and I all met with Lyam yesterday, before we knew he was going to acknowledge Martin and throw the court into turmoil. He began to

mumble something or another about offices and rewards and such, but we all begged off. When he began to protest, I told him I didn't care what he did for Tully and Fannon, but if he tried to haul me up before all those people, I'd straightway turn him into a toad.'

Anita, overhearing the exchange, laughed. "So it is true!"

Pug, remembering the conversation in Krondor so many years ago, joined in the merriment. He looked back on all that had occurred to him in the years since he had first chanced to come to Kulgan's cottage in the forests, and reflected for a moment. After much risk and many conflicts he was safe with family and friends, with a great adventure, the building of the academy, yet to come. He wished that a few others - Hochopepa, Shimone, Kamatsu, Hokanu, as well as Almorella and Netoha - could share in his happiness. And he wished Ichindar and the Lords of the High Council could know the true reason for the betrayal on the day of peace. And most of all, he wished Tomas could have joined them.

'So thoughtful, husband?'

Pug snapped out of his mood and smiled. "Beloved, I was but thinking that in all things I am a most fortunate man.'

His wife placed her hand upon his and returned his smile. Tully leaned across the table and inclined his head towards the other end, where Laurie sat enraptured by Carline, who was laughing at some witticism he had made. It was obvious she found him as charming as Pug had promised, in fact, she looked captivated. Pug said, 'I think I recognize that expression on Carline's face. I think Laurie may be in for some trouble.'

Kasumi said, 'Knowing friend Laurie, it is a trouble he will welcome.'

Tully looked thoughtful. 'There is a duchy at Bas-Tyra now in need of a duke, and he does seem a competent enough young man. Hmmm.'

Kulgan barked, 'Enough. haven't you had your fill of pomp? Must you go marrying the poor lad off to the King's sister so you can officiate in the palace again? Gods, they just met today!'

Tully and Kulgan seemed about to launch into another of their famous debates when Martin cut them both off.

'Let us change the subject. My head is awlirl, and we don't need your bickering.'

Tully and Kulgan exchanged startled looks, then both smiled. As one they said, "Yes, my lord.'

Martin groaned while those close by joined in the laughter. Martin shook his head. 'This seems so strange after so much fear and worry such a short time back. Why I nearly chose to go with Amos - ' He looked up. 'Where

is Amos?'

Upon hearing the seaman's name, Arutha looked up from his conversation with Anita. 'Where is that old pirate?'

Martin answered. 'He said something about arranging for a ship. I thought he was only making light, but I haven't seen him since the coronation.'

Arutha said, 'Arranging for a ship, the gods weep.' He stood and said, 'With Your Majesty's permission.'

Lyam said, 'Go and fetch him back. From all you have told me, he warrants some reward.'

Martin stood and said, 'I'll ride with you.'

Arutha smiled. 'Gladly.'

The two brothers hurried from the hall, making quick time to the courtyard. Porters and pages held horses for guests departing early. Arutha and Martin grabbed the first two in line, unceremoniously leaving two minor nobles without mounts. The two noblemen stood with mouths open, caught halfway between anger and amazement. 'Your pardon, my lords,' shouted Arutha as he spurred his horse towards the gate.

As they rode through the gates of the palace, across the arched bridge over the river Rillanon, Martin said, 'He said he would sail at sundown!'

'That gives us scant time!' shouted Arutha. Down winding streets they flew to the harbour.

The city was thick with celebrants, and several times they had to slow to avoid harming those who crowded the streets. They reached the harbourside and pulled up their mounts.

A single guard sat as if sleeping before the entrance to the royal docks. Arutha jumped down from his horse and jostled the man. The guard's helm fell from his head as he toppled over, slumping to the ground. Arutha checked him and said, 'He's alive, but he'll have a head on him tomorrow.'

Arutha regained his saddle and they hurried along Rillanon's long dockside to the last wharf. Shouts from men in the rigging of a ship greeted them as they turned their horses towards the end of a long pier.

A beautiful vessel was slowly moving away from the docks, and as they pulled up, Martin and Arutha could see Amos Trask standing upon the quarterdeck. He waved high above his head, still close enough so they could see his grinning face. 'Ha! it seems all ends well.'

Arutha and Martin dismounted as the distance between ship and pier slowly lengthened. 'Amos,' shouted Arutha. Amos pointed at a distant building. 'The boys who stood watch here are all in that warehouse. They're a little bruised, but they're alive.'



'Amos. that's the King's shiP!' yelled Arutha, waving for the ship to put back.

Amos Trask laughed. "I thought the Royal Swallow a grand name. Well, tell your brother I'll return it someday.'

Martin began to laugh. Then Arutha joined in. 'You pirate!' shouted the youngest brother. "I'll have him give it to you.'

With a deep cry of despair, Amos said, 'Ah, Arutha, you take all the fun out of life.'

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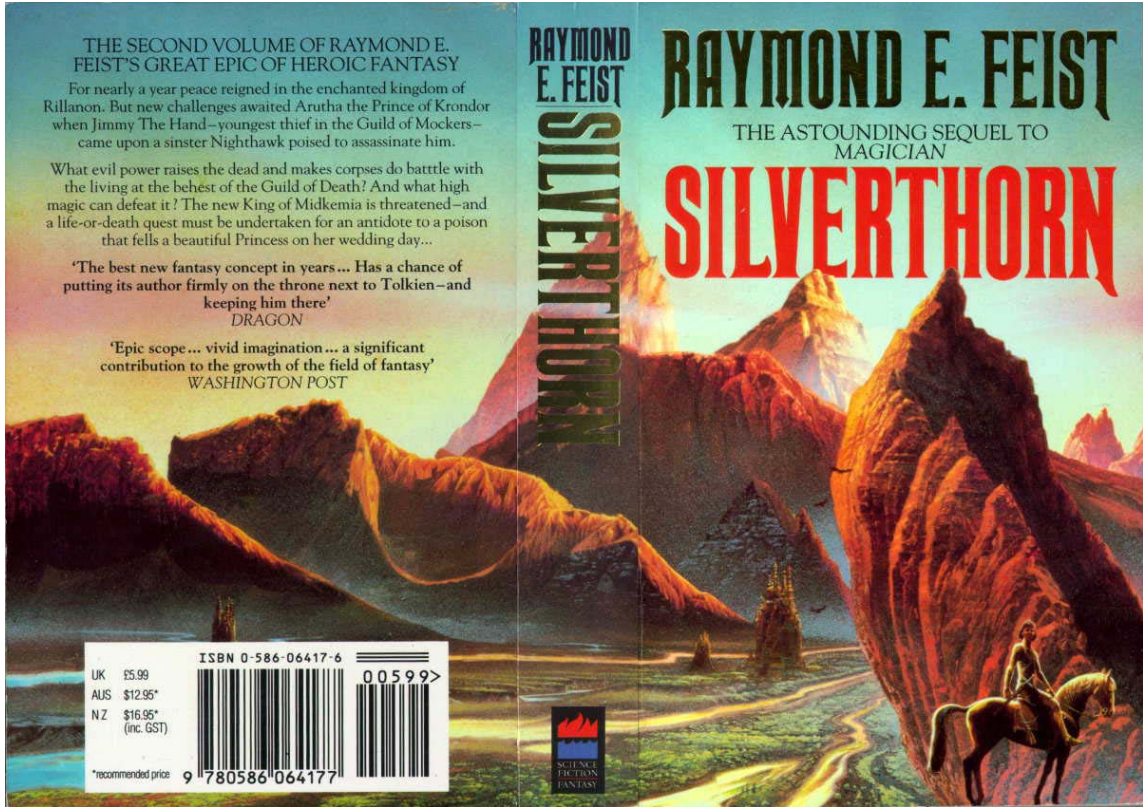
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Silverthorn  
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Prologue  
Twilight

The sun dropped behind the peaks.

The last rays of warmth touched the earth and only the rosy afterglow of the day remained. From the east, indigo darkness approached rapidly. The wind cut through the hills like a sharp-edged blade, as if spring were only a faintly remembered dream. Winter's ice still clung to shadow-protected pockets, ice that cracked loudly under the heels of heavy boots. Out of the evening's darkness three figures entered the firelight.

The old witch looked up, her dark eyes widening slightly at the sight of the three. She knew the figure on the left, the broad, mute warrior with the shaved head and single long scalp lock. He had come once before, seeking magic signs for strange rites. Though he was a powerful chieftain, she had sent him away, for his nature was evil, and while issues of good and evil seldom held any significance for the witch, there were limits even for her. Besides, she had little love for any *moredhel*, especially one who had cut out his own tongue as a sign of devotion to dark powers.

The mute warrior regarded her with blue eyes, unusual for one of his race. He was broader of shoulder than most, even for one of the mountain clans, who tended to be more powerful of arm and shoulder than their forest-dwelling cousins. The mute wore golden circle rings in his large, upswept ears, painful to affix, as the *moredhel* had no lobes. Upon each cheek were three scars, mystic symbols whose meaning was not lost upon the witch.

The mute made a sign to his companions, and the one to the far right seemed to nod. It was difficult to judge, he was clothed in an all-concealing robe, with a deep hood revealing no features. Both hands were hidden in voluminous sleeves that were kept together. As if speaking from a great distance, the cloaked figure said, 'We seek a reading of signs.' His voice was sibilant, almost a hiss, and there was a note of something alien in it. One hand appeared and the witch pulled away, for it was misshapen and scaled, as if the owner possessed talons covered with snakeskin. She then knew the creature for what it was: a priest of the Pantathian serpent people. Compared to the serpent people, the *moredhel* were held in high regard by the witch.

She turned her attention from the end figures and studied the one in the centre. He stood a full head taller

than the mute and was even more impressive in bulk. He slowly removed a bearskin robe, the bear's skull providing a helm for his own head, and cast it aside. The old witch gasped, for he was the most striking moredhel she had seen in her long life. He wore the heavy trousers, jerkin, and knee-high boots of the hill clans, and his chest was bare. His powerfully muscled body gleamed in the firelight, and he leaned forward to study the witch. His face was almost frightening in its near-perfect beauty. But what had caused her to gasp, more than his awesome appearance, was the sign upon his chest.

'Do you know me?' he asked the witch.

She nodded. 'I know who you appear to be.'

He leaned even farther forward, until his face was lit from below by the fire, revealing something in his nature.

'I am who I appear to be,' he whispered with a smile. She felt fear, for behind his handsome features, behind the benign smile, she saw the visage of evil, evil so pure it defied endurance. 'We seek a reading of signs,)' he repeated, his voice the sound of ice-clear madness.

She chuckled. "Even one so mighty has limits?"

The handsome moredhel's smile slowly vanished. 'One ' may not foretell one's own future.'

Resigned to her own likely lot, she said, 'I require silver.'

The moredhel nodded. The mute dug a coin from out of his belt pouch and tossed it upon the floor before the witch. Without touching it, she prepared some ingredients in a stone cup. When the concoction was ready, she poured it upon the silver. A hissing came, both from the coin and from the serpent man. A green-scaled claw began to make signs, and the witch snapped, 'None of that nonsense, snake. Your hot-land magic will only cant my reading.'

The serpent man was restrained by 'a gentle touch and smile from the centre figure, who nodded at the witch.

In crrroaking tones, her throat dry with fear, the witch said, 'Say you then truly: What would you know?' She studied the hissing silver coin, covered now in bubbling green slime.

is it time? Shall I do now that which was ordained?'

A bright green flame sprang from the coin and danced.

The witch followed its movement closely, her eyes seeing something within the flame none but she could divine.

After a while she said, "The Bloodstones form the Cross of Fire. That which you are, you are. That which you are born to do, . . . do!" the last word was a half-gasp.

Something in the witch's expression was unexpected, for the moredhel said, 'What else, crone?'

"you stand not unopposed, for there is one who is your bane. You stand not alone, for behind you . . . I do not

understand.' Her voice was weak, faint.

'What?' The moredhel showed no smile this time.

"Something . . . something vast, something distant something evil.'

The moredhel paused to consider, turning to the serpent man, he spoke softly yet commandingly. "Go then, Cathos. Employ your arcane skills and discover where

this seat of weakness lies. Give a name to our enemy. Find him.'

The serpent man bowed awkwardly and shambled out of the cave. The moredhel turned to his mute companion and said, "Raise the standards, my general, and gather the loyal clans upon the plains of Isbandia, beneath the towers of Bar-Sargoth. Raise highest that standard I have chosen for my own, and let all know we begin that which was ordained. You shall be my battlemaster, Murad, and all shall know you stand highest among my servants. Glory and greatness now await.

'Then, when the mad snake has identified our quarry, lead forth the Black Slayers. Let those whose souls are mine serve us by seeking out our enemy. Find him! Destroy him! Go!'

The mute nodded once and left the cave. The moredhel with the sign on his chest faced the witch. "Then, human refuse, do you know what dark powers move?'

"Aye, messenger of destruction, I know. By the Dark

Lady, I know.'

He laughed, a cold humourless sound. 'I wear the sign,' he said, pointing to the purple birthmark upon his chest, which seemed to glow angrily in the firelight. It was clear that his was no simple disfigurement but some sort of magic talisman, for it formed a perfect silhouette of a dragon in flight. He raised his finger, pointing upwards. "I have the power.' He made a circular motion with his upraised finger. 'I am the foreordained. I am destiny.'

The witch nodded, knowing death raced to embrace her. She suddenly mouthed a complex incantation, her hands moving furiously through the air. A gathering of power manifested itself in the cave and a strange keening filled the night. The warrior before her simply shook his head. She cast a spell at him, one that should have withered him where he stood. He remained, grinning at her evilly. 'You seek to test me with your puny arts, seer?'

seeing no effect, she slowly closed her eyes and sat erect, awaiting her fate. The moredhel pointed his finger at her and a silver shaft of light came forth, sinking the witch. She shrieked in agony, then exploded into white-hot fire. For an instant her dark form writhed within the

inferno, then the flames vanished.

The moredhel cast a quick glance at the ashes upon the floor, forming the outline of a body. With a deep laugh he gathered up his robe and left the cave.

Outside, his companions waited, holding his horse. Far below he could see the camp of his band, still small but destined to grow. He mounted and said, 'To Bar-Sargoth!' With a jerk on the reins he spun his horse and led the mute and the serpent priest down the hillside.

1

## Reunion

The ship sped home.

The wind changed quarter and the captain's voice rang out, aloft, his crew scrambled to answer the demands of a freshening breeze and a captain anxious to get safely to port. He was a seasoned sailingmaster, nearly thirty years in the King's navy, and seventeen years commanding his own ship; And the Royal Eagle was the best ship in the King's fleet, but still the captain wished for just a little more wind, just a little more speed, since he would not rest until his passengers were safely ashore.

Standing upon the foredeck were the reasons for the captain's concern, three tall men. Two, one blond and one dark, were standing at the rail, sharing a joke, for they both laughed. Each stood a full four inches over six feet, and each carried himself with the sure step of a fighting man or hunter. Lyam, King of the Kingdom of the Isles, and Martin, his elder brother and Duke of Crydee, spoke of many things, of hunting and feasting, of travel and politics, of war and discord, and occasionally they spoke of their father, Duke Borric.

The third man, not as tall or as broad of shoulder as the other two, leaned against the rail a short way off, lost in his own thoughts. Arutha, Prince of Krondor and youngest of the three brothers, also dwelt upon the past, but his vision was not of the father killed during the war with the Tsurani, in what was now being called the Riftwar. Instead he watched the bow wake of the ship as it sliced through emerald-green waters, and in that green he saw two sparkling green eyes.

The captain cast a glance aloft, then ordered the sails trimmed. Again he took note of the three men upon the foredeck and again he gave a silent prayer to Kilian, Goddess of Sailors, and wished Rillanon's tall spires were in sight. For those three were the three most powerful and important men in the Kingdom, and the sailingmaster refused to think of the chaos that would befall the Kingdom should any ill chance visit his ship.

Arutha vaguely heard the captain's shouts and the replies of his mates and crew. He was fatigued by the events of the last year, so he paid little attention to what was occurring about him. He could keep his thoughts only upon one thing: he was returning to Rillanon, and to Anita.

Arutha smiled to himself. His life had seemed unremarkable for the first eighteen years. Then the Tsurani invasion had come and the world had been forever changed. He had come to be counted one of the finest commanders in the Kingdom, had discovered an unsuspected eldest brother in Martin, and had seen a thousand horrors and miracles. But the most miraculous thing that had happened to Arutha had been Anita.

They had been parted after Lyam's coronation. For nearly a year Lyam had been displaying the royal banner to both eastern lords and neighbouring kings, and now they were returning home.

Lyam's voice cut through Arutha's reverie. 'What see you in the wave's sparkle, little brother?'

Martin smiled as Arutha looked up, 'and the former Huntmaster of Crydee, once called Martin Longbow, nodded towards his youngest brother. 'I wager a year's taxes he sees a pair of green eyes and a pert smile in the waves.'

Lyam said; 'No wager, Martin. Since we departed Rillanon I've had three messages from Anita on some matter or other of state business. All conspire to keep her in Rillanon while her mother returned to their estates a month after my coronation. Arutha, by rough estimate, has averaged better than two messages a week from her the entire time. One might draw a conclusion or two from that.'

'I'd be more than anxious to return if I had someone of her mettle waiting for me,' agreed Martin.

Arutha was a private person, ill humoured when it came to revealing deep feelings, and he was doubly sensitive to any question involving Anita. He was impossibly in love with the slender young woman, intoxicated with the way she moved, the way she sounded, the way she looked at him. And while these were possibly the only two men on all Midkemia to whom he felt close enough to share his feelings, he had never, even as a boy, shown good grace when he felt he was the butt of a jest.

As Arutha's expression darkened, Lyam said, "Put away your black looks, little storm cloud. Not only am I your King, I'm still your older brother and I can box your ears if the need arises.'

The use of the pet name their mother had given him and the improbable image of the King boxing the ears of the Prince of Krondor made Arutha smile slightly. He

was silent a moment, then said, 'I worry I misread this. Her letters, while warm, are formal and at times distant. And there are many young courtiers in your palace.'

Martin said, 'From the moment we escaped from Krondor, Your fate was sealed, Arutha. She's had you in her bow mark from the first, like a hunter drawing down on a deer. Even before we reached Crydee, when we were hiding out, she'd look at you in a certain way. No, she's waiting for you, have no doubt.'

"Besides,' added Lyam, 'you've told her how you feel.'

"Well, not in so many words. But I have stated my fondest affection.'

Lyam and Martin exchanged glances. 'Arutha,' said Lyam, 'you write with all the passion of a scribe doing year-end tax tallies.'

All three laughed. The months of travel had allowed a redefinition of their relationship. Martin had been both tutor and friend to the other two as boys, teaching hunting and woodcraft. But he had also been a commoner, though as Huntmaster he stood as a highly 'placed member of duke Borric's staff. With the revelation that he was their father's bastard, an elder half brother, all three had passed through a time of adjustment. Since then they had endured the false camaraderie of those seeking advantage, the hollow promises of friendship 'and loyalty from those seeking gain, and during this time they had discovered something more. In the others, each had found two men who could be trusted, who could be confided in, who understood what this sudden rise to preeminence meant, and who shared the pressures of newly inflicted responsibilities. In the other two, each had found friends. Arutha shook his head, laughing at himself. 'I guess I have known from the first as well, though I had doubts. She's so young.'

Lyam said,) "About our mother's age when she wed Father, you mean?"

Arutha fixed Lyam with a sceptical look. 'Do you have an answer for everything?'

Martin clapped Lyam on the back. 'of course,' he said. Then softly he added, "That's why he's the King.' As Lyam turned a mock frown upon Martin, the eldest brother continued. 'So when we return, ask her to wed, dear brother. Then we can wake old Father Tully from before his fireplace and we can all be off to Krondor and have a merry wedding. And I can stop all this bloody travel and return to Crydee.'

A voice from above cried out, 'Land ho!'

'Where away?' shouted the captain.

"Dead ahead.'

Gazing into the distance, Martin's practised hunter's



eye was the first to perceive the distant shores. Quietly he placed his hands upon his brothers' shoulders. After a time all three could see the distant outline of tall towers against an azure sky.

Softly Arutha said, 'Rillanon.'

The sounds of the light tapping of footfalls and the rustle of a full skirt held above hurrying feet accompanied the sight of a slender figure marching purposefully down a long hallway. 'The lovely features of the lady rightly acknowledged the reigning beauty of the court were set in an expression of less than pleasant aspect. The guards posted along the hall stood face front, but eyes followed her passage. More than one guard considered the likely target of the lady's well-known temper and smiled inwardly. The singer was in for a rude awakening, literally. In a most unladylike fashion, Princess Carline, sister to the King, swept past a startled servant who tried to jump aside and bow to her at the same time, a feat that landed him on his backside as Carline vanished into the guest wing of the palace.

Coming to a door, she paused. Patting her loose dark hair into place, she raised her hand to knock, then halted. Her blue eyes narrowed as she became irritated by the thought of waiting for the door to open, so she simply pushed it open without announcing herself.

The chamber was dark, as the night curtains were still drawn. The large bed was occupied by a large lump beneath the blankets that groaned as Carline slammed the door behind her. Picking her way across the clothing-strewn floor, she yanked aside the curtains, admitting the brilliant midmorning light. Another groan emitted from the lump as a head with two red-rimmed eyes peeked out over the bedcovers. 'Carline,' came the dry croak, 'are you trying to wither me to death?'

Coming to stand over the bed, she snapped, 'if you hadn't been carousing all night, and had been to breakfast as expected, you might have heard that my brothers' ship had been sighted. They'll be at the dock within two hours.'

Laurie of Tyr-sog, troubadour, traveler, former hero of the Riftwar, and lately court minstrel and constant companion to the Princess, sat up, rubbing at tired eyes. 'I was not carousing. The Earl of Dolth insisted on hearing every song in my repertoire. I sang until near dawn.' He blinked and smiled up at Carline. 'Scratching at his neatly trimmed blond beard, he said, 'The man has inexhaustible endurance, but also excellent taste in music.'

Carline sat on the edge of the bed, leaned over, and kissed him briefly. She deftly disengaged herself from

arms that sought to entangle her, Holding him at bay with her hand upon his chest, she said, 'Listen, you amorous nightingale, Lyam, Martin, and Arutha will be here soon, and the minute Lyam holds court and gets all the formalities done with, I'm talking to him about our marriage . '

, Laurie looked around as if seeking a corner in which to disappear. Over the last year their relationship had developed in depth and passion, but Laurie had a near-reflexive avoidance of the topic of marriage. "Now, Carline- ' he began. "'

"Now, Carline," indeed!' she interrupted with a jab of her finger into his bare chest. "You buffoon, I've had eastern princes, sons of half the dukes in the Kingdom, and who knows how many others simply begging for permission to Pay court to me. And I've always ignored them. And for what? So some witless musician can trifle 'with my affections? Well, we shall have an accounting.' Laurie grinned, pushing his tousled blond hair back He sat up and, before she' could move, kissed her deeply. When he pulled away, he said, 'Carline, love of my being, please. We've covered this ground.'

Her eyes, which had been half-closed during the kiss, instantly widened. 'Oh! We've covered this ground before?' she said, infuriated. "We will be married. That is final.' She stood up to avoid his embrace again. 'it has become the scandal .of the court, the Princess and her minstrel lover. It's not even an original tale. I am becoming a laughing-stock. Damn it all, Laurie, I'm nearly twenty-six. Most women my age are eight, nine years married. Would you have me die a spinster?'

'Never that, my love,' he answered, still amused.

Besides the fact of her beauty, and the slim chance of anyone's calling her an old maid, she was ten years his junior and he regarded her as young, a perception constantly furthered by her outbursts of childish temper. He sat up fully and spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness as he stifled his mirth. 'I am what I am, darling, no more or less. I've been here longer than I've been anywhere when I was a free man. I'll admit, though, this is a far more pleasant captivity than the last.' He was speaking of the years he had been a slave on Kelewan, the Tsurani homeworld. 'But you'll never know when I'll want to roam once more.' He could see her temper rising as he spoke, and was forced to admit to himself that he was often what brought out the worst in her nature. He rapidly changed tack. "Besides, I don't know if I'd make a good . . . whatever the husband of the King's sister is called.'

'Well, you'd better get used to it. Now get up and get dressed.'

Laurie grabbed the trousers she tossed to him and quickly put them on. When he was finished dressing he stood before her and put his arms around her waist. .Since the day we met I have been your adoring subject, Carline. I have never loved, nor will I love, anyone as I love you, but - '

"I know. I have had months of the same excuses.' She jabbed him in the chest again. "You've always been a traveller,' she mocked. 'You've always been free. You don't know how you would fare being tied to one spot - though I've noticed you've managed to endure settling down here in the King's palace.'

Laurie cast his eyes heavenwards. 'This is true enough.' .Well, lover mine, those excuses may serve you as you bid farewell to some poor tavern keeper's daughter, but they'll do you little good here. We shall see what Lyam thinks of all this. I should imagine there is some old law or other in the archives dealing with commoners becoming involved with nobles.'

Laurie chuckled. "There is. My father is entitled to a golden sovereign, a pair of mules, and a farm for your having taken advantage of me.

Suddenly Carline giggled, tried to smother it, then laughed aloud. 'You bastard.' Tightly hugging him, she rested her head upon his shoulder and sighed. 'I can never stay angry with you.

He cradled her gently in the circle of his arms. 'I do give you reason upon occasion,' he said softly.

"Yes, you do.'

'Well, not all that often.'

'Look you well, boyo,' she said. 'My brothers are nearing the harbour as we speak, and you stand here arguing. You may dare make free with my person, but the King may take a dim view of things as they stand.' "so I have feared,' Laurie said, with obvious concern in his voice.

Suddenly Carline's mood softened. Her expression changed to one of reassurance. 'Lyam will do whatever I ask. He's never been able to say no to anything I've truly asked for since I was tiny. This is not Crydee. He knows things are different here, and that I'm no longer a child.'

'So I have noticed.'

'Rogue. Look, Laurie. You're no simple farmer or cobbler. You speak more languages than any "educated" noble I have known. You read and write. You have traveled widely, even to the Tsurani world. You have wits and talents. You are much more able to govern than many who are born to it. Besides, if I can have an older brother who was a hunter before becoming a duke, why not a husband who was a singer?'

'Your logic is impeccable. I simply don't have a good

answer. I love you without stint, but the rest - '  
'Your problem is you have the ability to govern, but you just don't want the responsibility. You're lazy.'  
He laughed. "That's why my father tossed me out of the house when I was thirteen. Said I'd never make a decent farmer.'

She pushed away from him gently, her voice taking on a serious note. "Things change, Laurie. I've given this much consideration. I thought I was in love before, twice, but you're the only man who could get me to forget who I am and act this shamelessly. When I'm with you, nothing makes sense, but that's all right, because then I don't care if the way I feel makes sense. But now I must care. You'd better make a choice, and make it soon. I'll bet my jewels Arutha and Anita will announce they are betrothed before my brothers are in the palace a day. Which means we'll all be off to Krondor for their wedding.

'When they are wed, I'll return here with Lyam. It will be up to you to decide if you will be coming back with us, Laurie.' She locked gazes with him. 'I have had a wonderful time with you. I've feelings I couldn't imagine possible when I dreamed my ~girl's dreams of pug and then Roland. But you must get ready to choose. You are my first lover, and will always be my dearest love, but when I return here you will be either my husband or a memory.'

Before he could answer, she walked to the door. 'in all ways I love you, rogue. But time is short.' She paused. 'Now come along and help me greet the King.'

He came to her side and opened the door for her. They hurried to where carriages were waiting to take the reception committee to the docks. Laurie of Tyr-sog, troubadour, traveler, and hero of the Riftwar, was acutely aware of the presence of this woman at his side and wondered how it would feel to be denied that presence for good and all. He felt decidedly unhappy at the prospect.

Rillanon, capital of the Kingdom of the Isles, waited to welcome home her King. The buildings were bedecked in festive bunting and hothouse flowers. Brave pennants flew from the rooftops and bold banners of every colour were strung between the buildings over the streets the King would travel. Called Jewel of the Kingdom, Rillanon rested upon the slopes of many hills, a marvellous place of graceful spires, airy arches, and delicate spans. The late King, Rodric, had embarked upon a restoration of the city, adding lovely 'marble and quartz stone facing to most of the buildings before the palace'; rendering the city a sparkling wonderland in the afternoon sunlight. The Royal Eagle approached the King's dock, where

the welcoming party waited. In the distance, upon those buildings and hillside streets affording a clear view of the dock, throngs of citizens were cheering the return of their 'young King. For many years Rillanon had abided under the black cloud of King Rodric's madness, and though Lyam was still a stranger to most of the city's populace, he was adored, for he was young and handsome, his bravery in the Riftwar was widely known, and his generosity had been great. He had lowered taxes.

with a master's ease, the harbour pilot guided the King's ship into its appointed place. It was quickly made secure and the gangway run out.

Arutha watched as Lyam was the first to descend. As tradition dictated, he dropped to his knees and kissed the soil of his homeland. Arutha's eyes scanned the crowd, seeking Anita, but in the press of nobles moving forward to greet Lyam he saw no sign of her. A momentary cold stab of doubt struck him.

Martin nudged Arutha, who, protocol dictated, was expected to be the second to disembark. Arutha hurried down the gangway, with Martin a step behind. Arutha's attention was caught by the sight of his sister leaving the side of the singer, Laurie, to rush forward and fiercely hug Lyam. While others in the reception committee were not as free with ritual as Carline, there was a spontaneous cheer from the courtiers and guards awaiting the King's pleasure. Then Arutha had Carline's arms about his neck as she bestowed a kiss and hug on him. 'Oh, I've missed your sour looks,' she said happily.

Arutha had been wearing the dour expression he exhibited when lost in thought. He said, 'What sour looks?'

Carline looked up into Arutha's eyes and, with an innocent smile, said, 'You look as if you'd swallowed something and it moved.'

Martin laughed aloud at that, then Carline was hugging him in turn. He stiffened at first, for he was still less comfortable with a sister than with two brothers, then he relaxed and hugged her back. Carline said, 'I've grown bored without you three around.'

Seeing Laurie a short distance off, Martin shook his head. 'Not too bored, it seems.'

Carline playfully said, 'There's no law that says only men can indulge themselves. Besides, he's the best man I've met who's not my brother.' Martin could only smile at that while Arutha continued looking for Anita.

Lord Caldric, Duke of Rillanon, First Adviser to the King, and Lyam's great-uncle, smiled broadly as the King's huge hand engulfed his own in a vigorous shake.

Lyam nearly had to shout over the cheers from those nearby. "Uncle, how stands our Kingdom?"

"Well, my King, now that you've returned."

As Arutha's expression grew more distressful, Carline said, 'put away that long face, Arutha. She's in the eastern garden, waiting for you.'

Arutha kissed Carline's cheek, hurried away from her and a laughing Martin, and as he dashed past Lyam, shouted, 'With Your Majesty's permission.'

Lyam's expression ran quickly from surprise to mirth, while Caldric and the other courtiers 'were amazed at the Prince of Krondor's behaviour. Lyam leaned close to Caldric and said, 'Anita.'

Caldric's old face beamed with a sunny smile as he chuckled in understanding. 'Then you'll soon be off again, this time for Krondor and your brother's wedding?'

"We'd sooner hold it here, but tradition dictates the Prince weds in his own city, and we must bow before tradition. But that won't be for a few weeks yet. These things take time, and we have a kingdom to govern in the meantime, though it seems you've done well enough in our absence.'

"Perhaps, Your Majesty, but now that there is a King again in Rillanon, many matters held in abeyance this past year will be unloosed for your consideration. Those petitions and other documents forwarded to you during your travels were but a tenth part of what you will see.'

Lyam gave a mock groan. 'We think we shall have the captain put to sea again at once.'

Caldric smiled. "Come, Majesty. Your city wishes to see its King.'

The eastern garden was empty save for one figure. She moved quietly between well-tended planters of flowers not quite ready to send forth blooms. A few heartier varieties were already beginning to take on the bright green of spring and many of the bordering hedges were evergreen, but the garden still seemed more the barren symbol of winter than the fresh promise of spring, which would manifest itself within a few weeks.

Anita looked across the vista of Rillanon below. The palace sat atop a hill, once the site of a large keep that still served as its heart. Seven high-arched bridges spanned the river that surrounded the palace with the loops of its meandering course. The afternoon wind was chill, and Anita drew a shawl of fine silken material close about her shoulders. Anita smiled in remembrance. Her green eyes misted over slightly as she thought of her late father, Prince Erland, and of all that had occurred in the last year and more: how Guy du Bas-Tyra had arrived in Krondor and attempted to force her into a marriage of state, and how Arutha had come to Krondor incognito. They had hidden together under the protection of the Mockers - the thieves of Krondor - for over a month until their escape to

Crydee. At the end of the Riftwar she had travelled to Rillanon to see Lyam crowned. During all those months she had also fallen deeply in love with the King's younger brother. And now Arutha was returning' to Rillanon.

The tread of boots upon flagstone caused her to turn. Anita expected to see a servant or guard, come to tell of the King's arrival in the harbour. Instead a weary-looking man in fine but rumpled traveller's clothing approached across the garden. His dark brown hair was tousled by the breeze and his brown eyes were ringed with dark circles. His near-gaunt face was set in the half-frown which he assumed when he was dwelling upon something serious, and which she found so dear. As he neared, she silently marvelled at the way he walked, lithe, almost catlike in his quickness and economy of movement. As he came up to her, he smiled, tentatively, even shyly. Before she could muster years of court-taught poise, Anita found tears coming to her eyes. Suddenly she was in his arms, clinging tightly to him. 'Arutha' was all she said.

For a time they stood saying nothing, holding each other tight. Then he slowly tilted her head back and kissed her. Without words he spoke of his devotion and longing and without words she answered. He looked down at eyes as green as the sea and a nose delightfully dusted by a small scattering of freckles, a pleasing imperfection upon her otherwise fair skin. With a tired grin he said, "I've returned.'

Then he was laughing at the obvious remark. She laughed as well. He felt buoyant to be holding this slender young woman in his arms, smelling the faint scent of her dark red hair, which was caught up in some complex fashion popular at court this season. He rejoiced to be with her again.

She stepped away but held tightly to his hand. "it has been so very long,' she said softly. 'it was only to be for a month . . . then another, then more. You've been gone over half a year. I couldn't bring myself to go to the dock. I knew I'd cry at sight of you.' Her cheeks were wet from tears. She smiled and wiped them away.

Arutha squeezed her hand. "Lyam kept finding more nobles to visit. The business of the Kingdom,' he said with a wry note of deprecation. From the day he had met Anita, Arutha had been unable to articulate his feelings for the girl. Strongly attracted to her from the first, he had wrestled with his emotions constantly after their escape from Krondor. He was powerfully drawn to her and yet saw her as little more than a child, only about to come of age. But she had been a calming influence on him, reading his moods like no one else, sensing how to ease his worry, stem his anger, and draw him from his

dark introspection. And he had come to love her soft ways. He had remained silent until the night before he had departed with Lyam. They had walked in this garden, speaking late into the night, and while little of consequence had been said, Arutha had left feeling as if an understanding had been reached. The light, and occasionally somewhat formal, tone of her letters had caused him worry, fear that he had misread her that night, but now, looking down at her, he knew he had not. Without preamble he said, "I have done little but think of you since we left." He saw tears come again to her eyes, and she said, "And I of you."

"I love you, Anita. I would have you always at my side. Will you consent to marry me?"

She squeezed his hand as she said, "Yes," then embraced him again. Arutha's mind reeled under the sheer weight of happiness he felt. Holding her close, he whispered. "You are my joy. You are my heart.")

They stood there for a time, the tall, rangy Prince and the slender Princess, whose head barely reached his chin. They spoke softly and nothing seemed of importance except the other's presence. Then the self-conscious sound of someone clearing his throat brought them both out of their reverie. They turned to find a palace guardsman standing at the entrance to the garden. He said, "His Majesty approaches, Your Highnesses. he will be entering the great hall within a few minutes."

Arutha said, "We shall go there at once." He led Anita by the hand past the guard, who fell in behind them. Had they looked back, they would have seen a palace guardsman fighting hard to overcome a broad grin.

Arutha gave Anita's hand a final squeeze, then stationed himself next to the door as Lyam entered the grand throne room of the palace. As the King moved towards the dais upon which his throne rested, courtiers bowed to him, and the Court Master of Ceremonies struck the floor with the iron-shod butt of his ceremonial staff. A herald shouted, "Hearken to me, hearken to me! Let the word go forth: Lyam, first of that name and by the grace of the gods rightwise ruler, is returned to us and again sits upon his throne. Long live the King."

"Long live the King." came the response of those gathered in the great hall.

When he was seated, his simple gold circlet of office upon his brow and his purple mantle upon his shoulders, Lyam said, "We are pleased to be home."

The Master of Ceremonies struck the floor again and the herald shouted out Arutha's name. Arutha entered the hall, Carline and Anita behind him, and Martin behind them, as protocol dictated. Each was announced



in order. When all were in place at Lyam's side, the King motioned to Arutha.

Arutha came to his side and leaned over. 'Did you ask her?' said the king.

With a lopsided smile Arutha responded, 'Ask her what?'

Lyam grinned. 'To marry, jackanapes. Of course you did, and from that sloppy smile, she said yes,' he whispered. 'Go get back in place and I'll make the announcement in a moment.' Arutha went back to Anita's side and Lyam motioned Duke Caldric over. 'We are weary my lord Chancellor. We would be pleased to keep the day's business brief.'

"There are two matters I judge require Your Majesty's attention this day. The balance may wait.'

Lyam indicated that Caldric should proceed. 'First, from the Border Barons and Duke Vandros of Yabon, we have reports of unusual goblin activity in the Western Realm.

Arutha's attention was drawn from Anita at this. The Western Realm was his to govern. Lyam looked over towards him, then Martin, indicating they should attend. Martin said, 'What of Crydee, my lord?'

Caldric said, 'No word from the Far Coast, Your Grace. At this time we've only reports from the area between Highcastle to the east and the Lake of the Sky to the west - steady sightings of goblin bands moving northward, and occasional raids as they pass villages. 'Northwards' Martin glanced at Arutha.

Arutha said, 'With Your Majesty's permission?' Lyam nodded. 'Martin, do you think the goblins move to join the Brotherhood of the Dark Path?'

Martin considered. 'I would not dismiss such a possibility. The goblins have long served the moredhel.

Though I would have thought it more likely the Dark Brothers would be moving south, returning to their homes in the Grey Tower Mountains.' The dark cousins to the elves had been driven northward from the Grey Towers by the Tsurani invasion during the Riftwar. Martin said to Caldric, 'My lord, have there been reportings of the Dark Brotherhood?'

Caldric shook his head. 'There have been the usual sightings along the foothills of the Teeth of the World, Duke Martin, but nothing extraordinary. Lords Northwarden, Ironpass, and Highcastle send their usual reports, nothing more, regarding the Brotherhood.'

Lyam said, 'Arutha, we shall leave it to you and Martin to review these reports and determine what may be required in the West.' He looked at Caldric. "What else, my lord?"

'A message from the Empress of Great Kesh, Your

Majesty.'

'And what has Kesh to say to Isles?'

"The Empress has ordered her ambassador, one Abdur Rachman Memo Hazara-Khan, to Isles for the purpose of discussing ending whatever contention may exist between Kesh and Isles.'

Lyam said, "That news pleases us, my lord. Overlong has the issue of the Vale of Dreams prevented our Kingdom and Great Kesh from treating fairly with one another in other matters. It would prove doubly beneficial to our two nations if we could settle this matter for all time.' Lyam stood. 'But send word that His Excellency will have to attend us in Krondor, for we have a wedding to celebrate.

'My lords and ladies of the court, it is with profound pleasure that we announce the forthcoming wedding of our brother Arutha to the Princess Anita.' The King turned to Arutha and Anita, taking them each by the hand and presenting them to the assembled court, who applauded the announcement.

From where she stood next to her brothers, Carline threw Laurie a dark frown, and went to kiss Anita's cheek. While good cheer reigned in the hall, Lyam said, 'This day's business is at an end.'

2

Krondor

The city slumbered.

A mantle of heavy fog had rolled in off the Bitter Sea, enshrouding Krondor in dense whiteness. The capital of the Western Realm of the Kingdom never rested, but normal night sounds were muffled by the nearly impenetrable haze cloaking the movements of those still travelling the streets. Everything seemed more subdued, less Strident than usual, almost as if the city were at peace with itself.

For one inhabitant of the city the night's □ conditions were nearly ideal. The fog had turned every street into a narrow, dark passageway, each block of buildings into an isolated island. The unending gloom was punctuated slightly by streetlamps at the corners, small way stations of warmth and brightness for passersby before they once more plunged into the damp and murky night. But between those small havens of illumination one given to working in darkness was granted additional protection, as small noises were deadened and movements were masked from chance observation. Jimmy the Hand went about his business.

About fifteen years of age, Jimmy was already counted

among the most gifted members of the Mockers, the Guild of Thieves. Jimmy had been a thief nearly all his short life, a street boy who had graduated from stealing fruit from peddlers' carts to full membership in the Mockers. Jimmy's father was unknown to him, and his mother had been a prostitute in the Poor Quarter until her death at the hands of a drunken sailor. Since then the boy had been a Mocker, and his rise had been rapid. The most astonishing thing about Jimmy's rise was not his age, for the Mockers were of the opinion that as soon as a boy was ready to try thieving, he should be turned loose. Failure had its own rewards. A poor thief was quickly a dead thief. As long as another Mocker was not put at risk, there was little loss in the death of a thief of limited talents. No, the most astonishing fact of Jimmy's rapid rise was that he was nearly as good as he thought he was. With stealth bordering on the preternatural he moved about the room. The night's quiet was broken only by the deep snores of his unsuspecting host and hostess. The faint glow from a distant street-lamp, entering the open window, was his only illumination. Jimmy peered around, his other senses aiding his search. A sudden change in the sound of the floorboards under Jimmy's light tread, and the thief found what he was looking for. he laughed inwardly at the merchant's lack of originality in hoarding his wealth. With economical movement the boy thief had the false floorboard up and his hand into Trig the Fuller's hideaway.

Trig snorted and rolled over, bringing a responding snore from his fat wife. Jimmy froze in place, barely breathing, until the two sleeping figures were quiescent for several minutes. He then extracted a heavy pouch and gently placed the booty in his tunic, secured by his wide belt. He put the board back and returned to the window. With luck it might be days before the theft was discovered.

He stepped through the window and, turning backwards, reached up to grip the eaves. A quick pull, and he was sitting on the roof. Overhanging the edge, he closed the window shutters with a gentle push and jiggled the hook and twine so the inside latch fell back into place. He quickly retrieved his twine, silently laughing at the perplexity sure to result when the fuller tried to figure out how the gold had been taken. Jimmy lay quietly for a moment, listening for sounds of waking inside. When none came, he relaxed.

He rose and began making his way along the Thieves' highway, as the rooftops of the city were known. He leaped from the roof of Trig's house to the next, then sat down upon the tiles to inspect his haul. The pouch was evidence the Fuller had been a thrifty man, holding back

a fair share of his steady profits. It would keep Jimmy in comfort for months if he didn't gamble it all away.

A slight noise caused Jimmy to drop to the roof, hugging the tiles in silence. He heard another sound, a scuffle of movement coming from the other side of a gable halfway down the roof from where he lay. The boy cursed his luck and ran a hand through his fog-damp curly brown hair. For another to be upon the rooftops nearby could only spell trouble. Jimmy was working without writ from the Nightmaster of Mockers, a habit of his that had earned him reprimands and beatings the few times he had been found out, but if he was now jeopardizing another mocker's nightwork, he was in line for more than harsh words or a cuffing around the room. Jimmy was treated as an adult by others in the guild, his position hard won by skill and wit. In turn he was expected to be a responsible member, his age being of no account. By his risking the life of another Mocker, his own could be forfeit. The other alternative could prove as bad. If a freebooting thief was working the city without permission from the Mockers, it was Jimmy's duty to identify and report him. That would somewhat mitigate Jimmy's own breach of Mocker etiquette, especially if he gave the guild its normal two thirds of the fuller's gold. Jimmy slipped over the peak of the roof and crawled along until he was opposite the source of the noise. He need only glimpse the independent thief and report him. The Nightmaster would circulate the man's description and sooner or later he would be paid a visit by some guild bashers who would educate him in the proper courtesies due the Mockers by visiting thieves'. Jimmy edged upwards and peered over the rooftop. He saw nothing. Looking about, he glimpsed a faint movement from the corner of his eye and turned. Again he saw nothing. Jimmy the Hand settled down to wait. There was something here that provoked his sensitive curiosity. That acute curiosity was one of Jimmy's only weaknesses when it came to work - that and an occasional irritation with the need to divide his loot with the guild, which took a dim view of this reluctance. His upbringing

by the Mockers had given him an appreciation of life - a scepticism bordering on cynicism - far beyond his years. He was uneducated but canny. One thing he knew: sound does not issue from thin air - except when magic is in Play.

Jimmy settled down a moment to puzzle out what he didn't see before him. Either some invisible spirit was squirming about uncomfortably on the roof tiles, which while possible was highly unlikely, or something more corporeal was hidden deep within the shadows of the other side of the gable.

Jimmy crawled along until he was opposite the gable and raised himself slightly to look over the peak of the roof. He peered into the darkness and when he heard another faint scuffling was rewarded with a glimpse of movement. Someone was deep within the gloom, wearing a dark cloak. Jimmy could locate him only when he moved. Jimmy inched along below the peak to gain a better angle to watch, until he was directly behind the

figure. Again he reared up. The lurker moved, adjusting his cloak around his shoulders. The hair on the back of Jihmmy's neck stood up. The figure before him was dressed all in black and carried a heavy crossbow. This was no thief but a Nighthawk!

Jimmy lay rock still. To stumble across a member of the Guild of Death at work was not likely to enhance one's prospects of old age. But there was a standing order among the Mockers that any news of the brotherhood of assassins was to be reported at once, and the order had come down from the Upright Man himself, the highest authority in the Mockers. Jimmy chose to wait, trusting in his skills should he be discovered. He might not possess the nearly legendary attributes of a Nighthawk, but he had the supreme confidence of a fifteen-year-old boy who had become the youngest Master Thief in the history of the Mockers. If he was discovered, it would not be his first chase across the Thieves' Highway.

Time passed and Jimmy waited, with a discipline unusual for one his age. A thief who cannot remain still for hours if needs be does not remain a living thief long. Occasionally Jimmy heard and glimpsed the assassin moving about. Jimmy's awe of the legendary Nighthawks steadily lessened, for this one displayed little skill in staying motionless. Jimmy had long before mastered the trick of quietly tensing and relaxing muscles to prevent cramping and stiffening. Then, he considered, most legends tend to be overstated, and in the Nighthawks' line of work it was only to their advantage to keep people in awe of them.

Abruptly the assassin moved, letting his cloak fall away completely as he raised his crossbow. Jimmy could hear hoofbeats approaching. Riders passed below, and the assassin slowly lowered the weapon. Obviously those below had not included his intended' prey.

Jimmy' elbowed himself a little higher to gain a better view of the man, now that his cloak didn't mask him. The assassin turned slightly, retrieving his cloak, exposing his face to Jimmy. The thief gathered his legs under him, ready to spring away should the need arise, and studied the man. Jimmy could make out little, except that the man had dark hair and was light-complexioned. Then the assassin seemed to be looking directly at the boy.

Jimmy's heart pounded loudly in his ears and he wondered how the assassin could fail to hear such a racket. But the man turned back to his vigil, and Jimmy dropped silently below the roof peak. He breathed slowly, fighting back a sudden giddy urge to giggle. After it passed, he relaxed slightly and chanced another look. Again the assassin waited. Jimmy settled in. He wondered at the Nighthawk's weapon. The heavy crossbow

was a poor choice for a marksman, being less accurate than any good bow. It would do for someone with little training, for it delivered a bolt with thundering force - a wound less than fatal from an arrow could kill if from a bolt, because of the added shock of the blow. Jimmy had .once seen a steel cuirass on display in a tavern. The metal breastplate had a hole in it the size of Jimmy's fist, punched through by a bolt from a heavy crossbow. It had been hung up not because of the size of the hole, which was usual for the weapon, but because .the wearer had somehow survived. But the weapon had its disadvantages. Besides being inaccurate past a dozen yards, it had a short range.

Jimmy craned his neck to watch the Nighthawk and felt a tic in his right arm. He shifted his weight slightly to his left. Suddenly a tile gave way beneath his hand and with a loud crack it broke. It fell away, clattering over the roof to crash down on the cobbles below. To Jimmy it was a thunder peal sounding his doom.

Moving with inhuman speed, the assassin turned and ' fired. Jimmy's slipping saved his life, for he could not have dodged fast enough to avoid the bolt, but gravity had provided the necessary speed. He struck the roof and heard the quarrel pass over his head. For a brief instant he imagined his head exploding like a ripe pumpkin and silently thanked Banath, patron god of thieves.

Jimmy's reflexes saved him next, for rather than standing, he rolled to his right'. Where he had lain a moment before, a sword came crashing down. Knowing he couldn't gain enough of a lead to outrun the ' assassin, Jimmy leapt up into a crouch, pulling his dirk from his . right boot top in a single motion. He had little love for fighting, but he had realized early in his career that his life might depend upon his use of the blade. He had practised diligently whenever the opportunity had presented itself. Jimmy only wished his rooftop foray had not precluded his bringing along his rapier.

The assassin turned to face the boy, and Jimmy saw him teeter for a brief instant. The Nighthawk might have quick reflexes, but he was not used to the precarious footing the rooftops offered. Jimmy grinned, as much to hide his fear as from any amusement at the assassin's unease.

In a hissing whisper the assassin said, "Pray to whatever gods brought you here, boy.' Jimmy thought such a remark odd, □ considering it distracted

only the speaker. The assassin lashed out, the blade slicing the air where Jimmy had been, and the boy thief was off.

He dashed along the roof and leapt back to the building wherein lived Trig the Fuller. A moment later he could hear the assassin landing also. Jimmy ran nimbly until he

was confronted by a yawning gap. In his hurry he had forgotten there was a wide alley at this end of the building and the next building was impossibly distant. He spun about. The assassin was slowly approaching, his sword point levelled at Jimmy. Jimmy was struck by a thought and suddenly began a mad stomping dance upon the roof. In a moment the noise was answered by an angry voice from below. 'Thief! I am undone!' Jimmy could picture Trig the Fuller leaning out of his window, rousing the city watch, and hoped the assassin had the same picture in mind. The racket below would surely have the building surrounded in short order. He prayed the assassin would flee rather than punish the author of his failure.

The assassin ignored the fuller's cries and advanced upon Jimmy. Again he slashed and Jimmy ducked, bringing himself inside the assassin's reach. Jimmy stabbed with his dirk and felt the point dig into the Nighthawk's sword arm. The assassin's blade went clattering to the street below. A howl of pain echoed through the night, silencing the fuller's shouts. Jimmy heard the shutters shut over his head.

The assassin dodged another thrust by Jimmy and pulled a dagger from his belt. He advanced again, not speaking, his weapon held in his left hand. Jimmy heard shouts from the street below and resisted the urge to cry for aid. He felt little confidence about besting the Nighthawk, even if the assassin was fighting with his off hand, but he was also reluctant to explain his presence upon the fuller's roof. Besides, even should he shout for aid, by the time the watch arrived, gained entrance to the house, and reached the roof the issue would be decided. Jimmy backed to the end of the roof, until his heels hung in space. The assassin closed, saying, 'You have nowhere left to run, boy.'

Jimmy waited, preparing a desperate gamble. The assassin tensed, the sign Jimmy had watched for. Jimmy crouched and stepped backwards all at once, letting himself fall. The assassin had begun a lunge, and when his blade did not meet the expected resistance, he overbalanced and fell forward. Jimmy caught the edge of the roof, nearly dislocating his shoulder sockets with the jolt. He felt more than saw the assassin fall past, silently speeding through the darkness to crash on the cobbles below.

Jimmy hung for a moment, his hands, arms, and shoulders afire with pain. It would be so simple just to let go and fall into soft darkness. Shaking off the fatigue and pain, he urged protesting muscles to pull himself back onto the roof. He lay gasping for a moment, then rolled over and looked down.

The assassin lay still on the cobbles, his crooked neck

clear evidence he was no longer alive. Jimmy □  
breathed deeply, the chill of fear finally acknowledged.  
He suppressed a shudder and ducked down as two men  
rushed into the alley below. They grabbed the corpse and  
rolled it over, then picked it up and hurried off. Jimmy  
considered. For the assassin to have confederates about  
was a certain sign this had been  
a Guild of Death undertaking.  
But who was expected down this street at this hour of the night? Casting  
about for a moment, he  
weighed the risk of staying a little longer to satisfy his  
curiosity against the certain arrival of the city watch  
within a few more minutes. Curiosity won. The sound of hoofbeats □  
echoed through the fog, and  
soon two riders came into the light that burned from the  
lantern before Trig's home. It was at this moment that  
Trig decided to open his shutters again and resume his  
hue and cry. Jimmy's eyes widened as the riders looked  
up towards the fuller's window. Jimmy had not seen one  
of the men in over a year, but he was well known to the  
thief. Shaking his head at the implications of what he  
saw, the boy thief judged it a good time to depart. But  
seeing that man below made it impossible for Jimmy to  
consider this night's business at an end. It would most  
likely be a long night. He rose and began his trek along  
the Thieves' Highway, back towards Mockers' Rest.

Arutha reined in his horse and looked up to where a man  
in a nightshirt shouted from a window. 'Laurie, what is  
that all about?' 'From what I can make out between the wails and  
screams, I judge that burgher to have recently been the  
victim of some felony.'

Arutha laughed. 'I guessed that much □ myself.'  
He did not know Laurie well, but he enjoyed the singer's wit and  
sense of fun. He knew there was now some trouble  
between Laurie and Carline, which was why Laurie had  
asked to accompany Arutha on his journey to Krondor.  
Carline would be arriving in a week with Anita and  
Lyam. But Arutha had long ago decided that what Carline  
didn't confide in him wasn't his business. Besides, Arutha  
was sympathetic to Laurie's plight if he had fallen into  
her bad graces. After Anita, Carline was the last person  
Arutha would wish angry with him.

Arutha studied the area as a few sleepy souls in  
neighbouring buildings began shouting inquiries. 'Well,  
there's bound to be some investigation here soon. We'd  
best be along.'

As if his words had been prophecy, Arutha and Laurie  
were startled to hear a voice coming out of the fog. 'Here now!'  
emerging from the murk were three men wearing  
the grey felt caps and yellow tabards of the city watch. □



The leftmost watchman, a beefy, heavy-browed fellow, carried a lantern in one hand and a large nightstick in the other. The centre man was of advancing years, close to retirement age from appearances, and the third was a young lad, but both had an air of street experience about them, evidenced in the way they casually had their hands resting on large belt knives. 'What passes this night?' the older watchman said, his voice a mixture of good-natured humour and authority.

"Some disturbance in that house, watchman.' Arutha pointed towards the fuller. 'We were simply passing by.' 'Were you now, sir? Well, I don't suppose you'd object to remaining for a few moments longer until we discover what this is all about.' He signalled to the young watchman to look around.

.Arutha nodded, saying nothing. At that point a red puffball of a man emerged from the house, waving his arms while he shouted, 'Thieves! they stole into my my very room, and took my treasure! What's to be done when a law-abiding citizen isn't safe in his bed, his own bed, I ask you?' Catching sight of Arutha and Laurie, he said, "Are these then the thieves, the vicious theives?' Mustering what dignity he could while wearing a voluminous nightshirt, he exclaimed, 'What have you done with my gold, my precious gold?'

The beefy watchman jerked on the shouting man's arm, nearly spinning the fuller completely around. 'Here now, watch your shouting, churl.'

.Churl!' shouted Trig. 'Just what, I ask, gives you the right to call a citizen, a law-abiding citizen, a - ' He stopped, and his expression changed to one of disbelief as a company of riders appeared out of the fog. At their head rode a tall, black-skinned man wearing the tabard of the captain of the Prince's Royal Household Guard. Seeing the gathering in the streets, he signalled for his men to rein in. With a shake of his head, Arutha said to Laurie, 'So much for a quiet return to Krondor.'

The captain said, 'Watchman, what is all this?'

The watchman saluted. "That is what I was just undertaking to discover this very minute, Captain. We apprehended these two . . .' He indicated Arutha and Laurie.

The captain rode closer and laughed. The watchman looked sideways at this tall captain, not knowing what to say. Riding up to Arutha, Gardan, former sergeant of the garrison at Crydee, saluted. "Welcome to your city, Highness.' At these words the other guards braced in their saddles, saluting their Prince.

Arutha returned the salute of the guardsmen, then shook hands with Gardan while the watchmen and the fuller stood speechless. "Singer,' said Gardan, 'it is good to see you again, as well.' Laurie acknowledged the

greeting with a smile and wave. He had known Gardan for only a brief while before Arutha had dispatched him to Krondor to assume command of the city and palace guards, but he liked the grey-haired soldier.

Arutha looked to where the watchmen and the fuller waited. The watchmen had their caps off and the seniormost said, 'Beggin' Your Highness's pardon, old Bert didn't know. Any offence was unintended, Sire.'

Arutha shook his head, amused despite the late hour and the cold weather. "No offence, Bert the Watchman. You were but doing your duty, and rightly so.' He turned to Gardan. 'Now, how in heaven's name did you manage to find me?'

'Duke Caldric sent a full itinerary along with the news that you were returning from Rillanon. You were due in tomorrow, but I said to Earl Volney you'd most likely try to slip in tonight. As you were riding from Salador, there was only one gate you'd enter' - he pointed down the street towards the eastern gate, unseen in the fogshrouded night - 'and here we are. Your Highness arrived even earlier than I had expected. Where is the rest of your party?'

"Half the guards are escorting the Princess Anita towards her mother's estates. The rest are camped about six hours ride from the city. I couldn't abide one more night on the road. Besides, there's a great deal to be done.' Gardan looked quizzically at the Prince, but all Arutha would say was "More when I speak to Volney. Now' he looked at the fuller - 'who is this loud fellow?' "This □ is Trig the Fuller, Highness,' answered the senior watchman. 'He claims someone broke into his house and stole from him. He says he was awakened by the sounds of struggle on his roof. '

Trig interrupted. 'They were fighting over my head, over' my . . . very . . . head . . .' His voice trailed off as he realized who he was speaking to. '. . . Your Highness,' he finished, suddenly embarrassed.

The heavy-browed watchman threw him a stern look 'He says he heard some sort of scream and, like a turtle pulled his head back in from the window.'

Trig nodded vigorously. "Like someone was doing murder, doing bloody murder, Your Highness. It was horrible.' The beefy watchman visited Trig with an elbow 'to the ribs at the interruption.

The young watchman came from the side alley. "This was long atoP some rubbish on the street the other side of the house, Bert.' He held out □ the assassin's sword.

"There was some blood on the grip, but none on the blade. There's also a small pool of blood in the alley, but no body, anywhere.' Arutha motioned for Gardan to take the sword. □

The young watchman, observing the guards and the obvious position of command assumed by the newcomers, handed up the sword, then doffed his own cap.

Arutha received the sword from Gardan, saw nothing significant in it, and returned it to the watchman. 'Turn your guards around, Gardan. It is late and there's little sleep left this night.'

'But what of the theft?' cried the fuller, shaken loose from his silence. 'It was my savings, my life savings. I'm ruined. What shall I do?' The Prince turned his horse and came alongside the watchmen.

To Trig he said, 'I offer my sympathies, good fuller, but rest assured the watch will do their utmost to retrieve your goods.'

'Now,' said Bert to Trig, 'I suggest you turn in for what's left of the night, sir. In the morning you may enter a complaint with the duty sergeant of the watch. He'll want a description of what was taken.'

'What was taken? Gold, man, that's what they took! My hoard, my entire hoard.'

'Gold, is it? Then,' said Bert, with the voice of experience, "

I suggest you turn in and tomorrow begin to rebuild your treasure, for as sure as there's fog in Krondor, you'll not see one coin again. But do not be too disconsolate, good sir. You are a man of means, and gold quickly comes to those of your station, resources, and enterprise." Arutha stifled a laugh, for despite the man's personal tragedy, he stood a comic figure in his nightshirt of linen his nightcap tipping forward to almost touch his nose 'Good fuller, I will make amends.' He pulled his dagger from his belt and handed it down to Bert the watchman. 'This weapon bears my family crest. The only others like it are worn by my brothers, the King and the Duke of Crydee. Return it to the palace tomorrow and a bag of gold will be placed in its stead. I'll have no unhappy fullers in Krondor on the day of my homecoming. Now I bid you all good night.' Arutha spurred his horse and led his companions towards the palace.

When Arutha and his guards had vanished into the room, Bert turned to Trig. 'Well then, sir, there's a happy end to it,' he said, passing the Prince's dagger over to the fuller. "And you may take some added pleasure in knowing you are one of the few of common birth who may claim to have spoken with the Prince of Krondor, albeit under somewhat strange and difficult circumstances.'

To his men he said, 'Let us back to our rounds.'

There'll be more than this one little bit of fun in Krondor on a night like this.' He signalled for his men to follow and led them off into the white murk.

Trig stood alone. After a moment his expression brightened

and he shouted up to his wife and any others who  
' looked out of their windows, 'i've spoken to the  
'prince. I, Trig the Fuller!' Feeling emotions somewhat  
akin to elation, the fuller trudged back into the warmth  
of his home, clutching Arutha's dagger.

Jimmy made his way through the narrowest of tunnels.  
the passage was part of the maze of sewers and other  
underground constructions common to that part of the  
city, and every foot of those underground passages was  
patrolled by the Mockers. Jimmy passed a tofsman -  
who made his living gathering up whatever of use  
he found in the sewers. He used a stick to halt a  
floating mass of debris carried along on the waters of the sewer.  
the floating mass was called a tof, that which tofleets, in  
a corruption of language. He picked at it, looking for  
a coin or anything else of value. He was in fact a sentry.  
Jimmy signalled to him, ducked under a low-hanging  
timber, apparently a fallen brace in an abandoned cellar,  
and entered a large hall carved out among the tunnels.  
Here was the heart of the guild of thieves, Mockers'  
rest. Jimmy retrieved his rapier from the weapons locker.  
He sought out a quiet corner in which to sit, for he felt  
troubled by the conflict he faced. By rights he should  
own up to his unauthorized pilfering of the fuller's house,  
split the gold, and take whatever punishment the Nightmaster  
meted out. By tomorrow afternoon the guild  
would know the fuller had been boosted, anyway. Once  
it was clear that no frEebooting thief was at work,  
suspicion would fall upon Jimmy and the others known to  
occasionally go for a night's foray without leave. Any  
punishment forthcoming then would be doubly harsh  
for his not having confessed now. Still, Jimmy couldn't  
consider only his own interests, since he knew the  
assassin's target had been none other than the Prince of  
Kronдор himself. And Jimmy had spent enough time with  
Arutha when the Mockers had hidden the Prince and  
Princess Anita from du Bas-Tyra's men to have developed  
a liking for the Prince. Arutha had given Jimmy the very  
rapier the boy thief wore at his side. No, Jimmy couldn't  
ignore the assassin's presence, but he was not clear where  
his best course lay. After long moments of quiet consideration, Jimmy  
decided. He would first attempt to get warning to the  
Prince, then pass along the information about the assassin  
to Alvarny the Quick, the Daymaster. Alvarny was a friend and □  
allowed Jimmy a little more latitude than  
Gaspar daVey, the Nightmaster. Alvarny would make no  
mention to the Upright man of Jimmy's tardiness in  
reporting, if the boy didn't take too long to come forth.  
Which meant Jimmy would have to reach Arutha quickly,  
then return at once to speak with the Daymaster - before

sundown tomorrow at the latest. Any later than that, and Jimmy would be compromised beyond even Alvarny's ability to look the other way. Alvarny might be a generous man, now that he was in his twilight, but he was still a Mocker. Disloyalty to the guild was something he would not permit.

"Jimmy!"

Jimmy looked up and saw Golden Base approaching. While young, the dashing thief was already experienced in parting rich older women from their wealth. He relied more on his blond good looks and charm than on stealth. baSe made a display of the valuable clothing he wore.

"What think you?"

Jimmy nodded in approval. "Taken to robbing tailors?"

"Golden aimed a playful, halfhearted cuff at Jimmy, who ducked easily, then sat next to the boy. 'No, you misbegotten son of an alley cat, I have not. My current "benefactor" is the widow of the famous Masterbrewer fallon.' Jimmy had heard of the man, his ales and beers had been so highly prized they had even graced the table of the late Prince Erland. 'And given her late husband's and now her far-reaching business concerns, she has recieved an invitation to the reception.'

"Reception?" Jimmy knew that Golden had some tidbit of gossip he wished to unfold in his own good time.

"Ah, '~' said Golden, 'did I fail to mention the fact of a wedding?"

Jimmy rolled his eyes upwards but played along. 'What wedding, Golden?'

"Why, The royal wedding of course. Though we shall be seated away from the King's table, it will not be at the most remote."

Jimmy sat bolt upright. "The King? In Krondor!"

"Of course."

Jimmy griPpEd Golden by the arm. "Start at the beginning. Grinning, the handsome but not terribly perceptive confidence man said, "The widow Fallen was informed by no' less a source than the purchasing agent at the palace, a man she has known for seventeen years, that extra stores were required .within a month's time for, "and I quote, "the royal wedding" One is safe in assuming a king would be in attendance at his own wedding.

Jimmy shook his head. 'No, you simpleton, not the King's. Anita and Arutha's '

Golden seemed ready to take umbrage at the remark, but then a sudden glimmer of interest showed in his eyes.

"What makes you say that?"

"The King weds in Rillanon. The Prince □weds in Krondor.' Golden nodded, indicating this made sense. "I hid out with Anita and Arutha, it was only a matter of

time before they wed. That's why he's back.'

Seeing a reaction at that, Jimmy quickly added, '

Or will be back soon. Jimmy's mind raced. Not only would Lyam be In Krondor for the wedding, but so would every noble of importance in the West, and no small number from the East. And if Base knew of the wedding, then half of Krondor did as well and the other half would know of it before the next sundown.

Jimmy's reverie was interrupted by the approach of Laughing Jack, the Nightwarden, senior lieutenant to the Nightmaster. The thin-lipped man came to stand before Jimmy and Base and, with hands upon hips, said, 'You look like you've something on your mind, boy?'

Jimmy had no affection for Jack. He was a dour, tightjawed man given to violent tempers and unnecessary cruelty. The only reason for his high place in the guild was his ability at keeping the guild's bashers and other hotheads in line. Jimmy's dislike was returned in kind by Jack, for it had been Jimmy who had appended 'Laughing' to Jack's name. In the years Jack had been in the guild, no one could remember hearing him laugh. 'Nothing, really," said Jimmy.

Jack's eyes narrowed as he studied Jimmy, then Base, 'for a long minute. 'I hear there was some fuss over near the east gate, you weren't thereabouts this night, were you?'

Jimmy maintained an indifferent expression and so did Base, as Jack had asked both the question.

'Golden shook his head in the negative. Jimmy wondered if Jack already knew about the Nighthawk. If he did, and someone else had caught sight of Jimmy nearby, Jimmy could expect no mercy from Jack's bashers. Still, Jimmy suspected that if Jack had proof, he would have come accusing, not questioning. Subtlety was not Jack's hallmark.

Jimmy feigned indifference as he said, "Another drunken argument? No, I was asleep most of the night.'

Good, then you'll be fresh,' said Jack. With a jerk of his head he indicated Base should absent himself. Golden rose and left without comment and Jack placed his boot on the bench next to Jimmy. 'We've got a job this night."

"Tonight?" said Jimmy', already counting the night half over. There were barely five hours left until sunrise.

"It's special, from himself." he said, meaning the upright Man. 'There's a royal do on at the palace and The Keshian ambassador's coming. A load of gifts arrived. late tonight, gifts for a wedding. They'll be straight off for the palace by midday next at latest, so tonight's our only chance to boost them; It's a rare chance.' His tone left no doubt in Jimmy's mind that his presence was not requested but required. Jimmy had hoped to get some sleep tonight before heading for the palace, but now

there was no chance of that. With a note of resignation in his voice he said, 'When and where?'

"An hour from now at the big warehouse one street over from the Fiddler Crab Inn, near dockside.'

Jimmy knew the place. He nodded and without another word left Laughing Jack. He headed up the stairs towards the street. The question of assassins and plots would have to wait a few hours more.

Fog still overwhelmed Krondor. The warehouse district near the docks was usually quiet in the early morning hours, but this night the scene was otherworldly. Jimmy wended his way among large bales of goods, of too little value to warrant the additional expense of storage inside, and therefore safe from the threat of thievery. Bulk cotton, animal fodder to be shipped, and stacked lumber created a maze of maddening complexity through which Jimmy moved quietly. He had spied several dock watchmen, but the night's dampness and a generous bribe kept them close to their shed, where a fire burned brightly in a brazier, relieving the gloom. Nothing short of a riot would get them away from the warmth. The Mockers would be long removed from this area before those indifferent guardians stirred. Reaching the designated meeting place, Jimmy looked about and, seeing no one in sight, settled in to wait. He was early, as was his habit, for he liked to compose his mind before the action began. Additionally, there was something in Laughing Jack's orders to him that made him wary. A job this important was rarely a last-minute affair, and even rarer was the Upright Man's allowing anything to tempt the Prince's wrath - and purloining royal wedding gifts would bring Arutha's wrath. But Jimmy was not placed highly enough in the guild to know if everything was on the up and up. He would simply have to remain alert.

The soft hint of someone approaching caused Jimmy to tense. Whoever was coming was moving cautiously, as was to be expected, but with the faint footfalls he had heard a strange sound. It was the slight clicking of metal on wood and, as soon as recognition registered, Jimmy leapt away. With a loud thud and an eruption of wood splinters, a crossbow bolt ripped through the side of a crate, where Jimmy had stood a moment before.

An instant later, two figures, dark silhouettes in the grey night, appeared from out of the gloom, running towards him.

Sword in hand, Laughing Jack rushed Jimmy without a word, while his companion furiously cranked up his crossbow for another shot. Jimmy drew weapons and executed a parry of an overhand slash by Jack, diverting the blade with his dirk, then lunging with his rapier in

return. Jack skipped to one side, and the two figures squared off.

'Now we'll see how well you can use that toad sticker, you snotty little bastard,' snarled Jack. "Watching you bleed just might give me something to laugh about.'

Jimmy said nothing, refusing to engage in distracting conversation. His only reply was a high-line attack that drove Jack back. He had no illusions about being a better swordsman than Jack, he simply wanted to keep alive long enough to gain a chance to flee.

Back and forth they moved, exchanging blows and parries, each looking for an opening to finish the contest. Jimmy tried for a counterthrust and misjudged his position, and suddenly fire erupted in his side. Jack had managed to cut Jimmy with the edge of his sword, a painful and potentially weakening wound, but not fatal, at least not yet. Jimmy looked for more room to move, feeling sick to his stomach from the pain, while Jack pressed his advantage. Jimmy backed off from a furious overhand slashing attack as Jack used the advantage of his heavier blade to beat down Jimmy's guard.

A sudden shout telling Jack to get out of the way warned Jimmy the other man had reloaded his crossbow.

Jimmy circled away from Jack, trying to keep moving and put Jack between himself and Jack's accomplice.

Jack slashed at Jimmy, turning him back rapidly, and then hacked downwards. The force of the blow dropped Jimmy to his knees.

Abruptly Jack leapt backwards, as if a giant hand had seized him by the collar and yanked. He slammed against a large crate and for an instant his eyes registered shocked disbelief, then rolled up in his head as limp fingers lost their grip on his sword. Jimmy saw that, where Jack's chest had been, 'a bloody, pulped mass was left by the passage of another crossbow bolt. But for the sudden fury of Jack's attack, Jimmy would have received it in the back. Without a sound Jack slumped, and Jimmy realized he was pinned to the crate. Jimmy rose from his crouch, spinning to confront the nameless man, who had tossed away the crossbow with a curse. He pulled his sword and rushed Jimmy. The man aimed a blow at Jimmy's head and the boy ducked, catching his heel. He fell heavily backwards into a sitting position while the man's swing took him off balance slightly. Jimmy tossed his dirk at the man. The man took the point of the long dagger in the side and looked down at the wound, more an inconvenience than an injury. But the brief distraction was all Jimmy needed. An expression of uncomprehending surprise crossed 'the nameless man's face as Jimmy got to one knee and ran him through. Jimmy yanked away his blade as the man fell. He



pulled his dirk from the dead man's side, then wiped off and resheathed his blades. Slowly examining himself, he found he was bleeding but would live.

Fighting off nausea, he walked to where Jack hung against the crate. Looking at the Nightwarden, Jimmy tried to gather his thoughts. He and Jack had never cared a whit for each other, but why this elaborate trap? Jimmy wondered if this was somehow tied up with the matter of the assassin and the Prince. It was something he could dwell on after he spoke to the Prince, for if there was a direct relationship, it boded ill for the Mockers. The possibility of a betrayal by one as highly placed as Laughing Jack would shake the guild to its foundation. Never losing his perspective, Jimmy relieved Jack and his companion of their purses, finding them both satisfactorily full. As he finished looting Jack's companion, he noticed something around the man's neck.

Reaching down, Jimmy came away with a gold chain, upon which hung an ebony hawk. He studied the charm for a few moments, then stuck it away in his tunic.

Looking around, he spied a likely-looking place to deposit the bodies. He plucked Jack from off the bolt, dragged him and the other man over to a nook formed by crates, and tipped some heavy sacks down on top of them. He turned the two damaged crates so the intact sides were revealed. It might be days before someone uncovered the corpses.

Ignoring his angry side and fatigue, Jimmy looked around to make sure he was still unobserved, then vanished into the foggy gloom.

### 3

#### Plots

Arutha attacked furiously.

Laurie exhorted Gardan to better efforts as the Prince forced his duelling companion into a retreat. The singer had willingly surrendered the honour of the first bout to Gardan, for he had been Arutha's partner every morning upon the journey from Salador to Krondor. While the practice had sharpened sword skills grown rusty in the King's palace, he had tired of always losing to the lightning-quick Prince. At least this morning he would have someone with whom to share his defeat. Still, the old campaigner wasn't without a trick or two and suddenly Gardan had Arutha backing up. Laurie whooped when he realized the captain had been lulling the Prince into a false sense of control. But after a furious exchange the Prince was again on the offensive, and Gardan was crying, 'Hold!' The chuckling Gardan backed away. "In all my years there have been only three men who could best me with

the blade, Highness: Swordmaster Fannon, your father, and now yourself.'

Laurie said, 'A worthy trio.' Arutha was about to offer a bout to Laurie when something caught his eye.

A large tree was situated in the corner of the palace exercise yard, where it overhung a wall separating the palace grounds from an alley and the city beyond. Something was moving along the branches of the tree. Arutha pointed. One of the palace guardsmen was already moving towards the tree, his attention drawn there by the Prince's stare.

Suddenly someone dropped from the branches, landing lightly on his feet. Arutha, Laurie, and Gardan all stood with swords held ready. The guardsman took the youth, as they now clearly saw him to be, by the arm and led him towards the Prince.

As they approached, a flicker of recognition crossed Arutha's face. 'Jimmy?'

Jimmy executed a bow, wincing slightly at the pain in his side, poorly bandaged by himself that morning.

Gardan said, 'Highness, you know this lad?'

With a nod, Arutha said, 'Yes. He may be a little older and a bit taller, but I know this young rogue. He's Jimmy the Hand, already a legend among brigands and cutpurses in the city. This is the boy thief who helped Anita and me flee the city.'

Laurie studied the boy, then laughed. "I never saw him clearly, for the warehouse was dark when Kasumi and I were taken from Krondor by the Mockers, but by my teeth, it's the same lad. "There's a party at Mother's."

Jimmy grinned. "And a good time will be had by all." "

Arutha said, 'So you know each other as well?'

'I told you once that when Kasumi and I were carrying the peace message from the Tsurani Emperor to King Rodric, there was a boy who had guided us from the warehouse to the city gate and led away the guards while we escaped Krondor. This was that boy, and I never could remember his name.'

Arutha put up his sword, as did the others. 'Well then, Jimmy, while I am glad to see you again, there is this matter of climbing walls into my palace.'

Jimmy shrugged. 'I thought it possible you'd be willing to see an old acquaintance, Highness, but I doubted I could convince the captain's guards to send word.'

Gardan smiled at the brash answer and signalled the guard to release his hold upon the boy's arm. 'Probably you're right, Jack-a-rags.'

Jimmy suddenly became aware he looked a poor sight to these men, used to the well-dressed and -groomed inhabitants of the palace. From his raggedly cut hair

down to his dirty bare feet he looked every inch the beggar boy. Then Jimmy saw the humour in Gardan's eyes.'

:Don't let his appearance mislead you, Gardan. He's far more capable than his years indicate.' To Jimmy, Arutha said, "You throw some discredit upon Gardan's guards by entering in this fashion. I expect you've reason to seek me out?"

'Yes, Highness. Business most serious and urgent.'

Arutha nodded.

"Well then, what is this most serious and urgent business?"

"Someone has placed a price on your head.'

Gardan's face registered shock. Laurie said, "What how?" "What leads you to think so?" asked Arutha.

'Because someone has already tried to collect.'

Besides Arutha, Laurie, and Gardan, two others listened to the boy's story in the Prince's council chambers. Earl Volney of Landreth had formerly been the assistant to the Principate Chancellor, Lord Dulanic, the Duke of Krondor who disappeared during the viceroyalty of Guy du Bas-Tyra. At Volney's side sat Father Nathan, a priest of Sung the White, Goddess of the One Path, once one of Prince Erland's chief advisers and there at Gardan's request. Arutha did not know these two men, but during the months of his absence Gardan had come to trust their judgement, and that opinion counted for much with Arutha. Gardan had been virtually acting Knight-Marshal of Krondor, just as Volney had been acting Chancellor while Arutha had been gone. Both men were stocky, but while Volney seemed one who had never known labour, simply a man always stout, Nathan looked like a wrestler now going to fat. Under that soft appearance strength still waited. Neither spoke until Jimmy had finished recounting his two fights of the night before.

Volney studied the boy thief for a moment, looking at him from under carefully combed, bushy eyebrows.

'Utterly fantastic. I simply don't wish to believe such a plot can exist.'

Arutha had sat with his hands forming a tent before his face, the fingers restlessly flexing. "I'd not be the first prince targeted for an assassin's blade, Earl Volney.' He said to Gardan, 'Double the guard at once, but quietly,) with no explanation given. I do not want rumours flying about the palace. Within two weeks we'll have every noble in the Kingdom worth mention in these halls, as well as my brother.'

Volney said, 'Perhaps you should warn His Majesty?'

'No,)' said Arutha flatly. 'Lyam will be travelling with a full company of his Royal Household Guard. Have a detachment of Krondorian Lancers meet them at Malac's Cross, but no word that it is other than a formal honour company. If a hundred soldiers can't protect him while he rides, he can't be protected.

"No, our problem lies here in Krondor. We have no choice in our options.'

'I'm not sure I follow, Highness,' said Father Nathan. Laurie threw his eyes heavenward while Jimmy grinned. Arutha smiled grimly. "I think our two streetwise companions have a clear understanding of what must be done.' Turning to face Jimmy and Laurie, Arutha said, "We must catch a Nighthawk.'

Arutha sat quietly while Volney paced the dining hall. Laurie, who had seen years enough of hunger to take food when it was available, ate while the stout Earl of Landreth stalked the hall. After watching Volney make another circuit before the table, Arutha, in weary tones, said, 'My lord Earl, must you pace so?'

The Earl, who was caught up in his own thoughts, stopped abruptly. He bowed towards Arutha slightly, but his expression was one of irritation. 'Highness, I'm sorry to have disturbed you' - his tone showed he wasn't in the least bit sorry, and Laurie smiled behind a joint of beef - 'but to trust that thief is sheer idiocy.'

Arutha's eyes widened and he looked at Laurie, who returned his amazed expression. Laurie said, "My dear Earl, you should cease being so circumspect. Come, just speak your mind to the Prince. Be direct, man!'

Volney flushed as he realized his gaffe. "I beg your pardon, I. . . .' He seemed genuinely embarrassed.

Arutha smiled his crooked half-smile. 'Pardon granted, Volney, but only for the rudeness.' He studied Volney for a quiet moment, then added, 'I find the candour rather refreshing. Say on.

'Highness,)' Volney said firmly, 'for all we know, this boy is but a part of some confidence game designed to capture you, or to destroy you, as he claims others intend.' 'And what would you have me do?'

Volney paused and shook his head slowly. "I don't know, Highness, but sending the boy alone to gather intelligence is . . . I don't know.'

Arutha said, "Laurie, tell my friend and counsellor the Earl that all is well.'

Gulping down a mouthful of fine wine, Laurie said, 'All is well, Earl.' When Arutha threw the minstrel a black look, Laurie added, 'in truth, sir, all possible is being done. I know the ways of the city as well as any man can who is not one of the Upright Man's own.

Jimmy's a Mocker. He may discover a lead to the Nighthawks where a dozen spies will find none.'

'Remember,' said Arutha, 'I met Guy's captain of secret police, Jocko Radburn, and he was a cunning, ruthless man who stopped at nothing to try to recapture Anita. The Mockers proved his match.'

Volney seemed to sag a little, then indicated he required the Prince's permission to sit. Arutha waved

him to a chair, and as he sat he said, "Perhaps you are right, singer. It is just that I have no means to answer this threat. The thought of assassins running loose gives me little ease.' Arutha leaned across the table. 'Less than myself? Remember, Volney, it appeared I was the intended target.'

Laurie nodded. 'it couldn't have been me they were after.'

'Perhaps a music lover?' countered Arutha dryly.

Volney sighed. 'i am sorry if I am acting poorly in all this. I have wished upon more than one occasion to be done with this business of administering the Principality.'

'Nonsense, Volney,' said Arutha. "You've done a capital job here. When Lyam insisted I make the eastern tour with him, I objected on the grounds that the Western Realm would suffer under any hand but my own - which was because of the effects of Bas-Tyra's rule and no comment upon your abilities. But I am pleased to see this was not the case. I doubt that any could have done better in running the daily affairs of the realm than you have, Earl.'

"I thank His Highness,' said Volney, somewhat less agitated for the compliment.

"In fact, I was going to ask you to stay on. With Dulanic mysteriously gone, we've no Duke of Krondor to act on behalf of the city. Lyam cannot announce the office vacant - without dishonouring Dulanic's memory by stripping him of the title - for another two years, but we can assume he is dead at Guy's or Radburn's hands. So for the time being, I think we'll plan on' your acting the part of Chancellor.'

Volney seemed less than pleased with this news, but took the pronouncement with good ,grace. He simply said, 'I thank His Highness for the trust.'

Further conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Gardan, Father Nathan and Jimmy. Nathan's bull neck bulged as he half carried Jimmy to a chair. The boy's face was drained of colour and he was sweating. Ignoring formality, Arutha pointed to a chair and the priest deposited jimmy there.

"What is this?' asked Arutha.

Gardan half smiled, half looked disapproving. "This young bravo has been running around since last night with a nasty cut in his side. He bandaged it himself and botched the job.'

"It had begun to fester,' added Nathan, "so I was forced to clean and dress it. I insisted on treating it before we came to see you, as the boy was turning feverish. It takes no magic to keep a wound from putrefaction, but every street boy thinks he is a surgeon. So the wound sours.' He looked down at Jimmy. "He's a little pale from the

lancing, but he'll be fine in a few hours - as long as he doesn't reopen the wound,' he added pointedly to Jimmy. Jimmy looked abashed. 'Sorry to put you to the trouble, father, but under other circumstances, I would have had the wound tended.'

Arutha looked at the boy thief. "What have you discovered?"

'This business of catching assassins may be even more difficult than we thought, Highness. There is a way to make contact, but it is varied and roundabout.' Arutha nodded for him to continue. 'I had to cadge a lot with the street people, but here is what I have gleaned. Should you wish to employ the services of the Guild of Death, you must take yourself away to the Temple of Ims-Kragma.'

Nathan made a sign of protection at mention of the Death Goddess. 'A devotion is said and a votive offering placed in the urn marked for such, but with the gold sewn into a parchment, giving your name. You will be contacted at their convenience within one day's time. You name the victim, they name the price. You pay or you don't. If you do, they tell you when and where to drop the gold. If you don't, they vanish and you can't reach them again.'

'Simple,' said Laurie. "They dictate when and where so laying a trap will not be easy.'

'Impossible, I should think,' said Gardan.

"Nothing is impossible,' said Arutha, his expression showing he was deep in thought.

After a long moment Laurie said, "I have it!"

Arutha and the others looked at the singer. "Jimmy, you said they will contact whoever leaves the gold within the day.' Jimmy nodded. 'Then what we need to do is have whoever leaves the gold stay in one place. A place we control.'

Arutha said, 'A simple enough idea, once it's thought of, Laurie. But where?'

Jimmy said, 'There are a few places we might take over for a time, Highness, but those who own them are unreliable . '

"I know a place,' said Laurie, "if friend Jimmy the Hand is willing to say devotions, so the Nighthawks will be less likely to think it a trap.'

'I don't know,' said Jimmy. "Things are funny in Krondor. If I'm under suspicion, we might never get another opportunity.' He reminded them of Jack's attack, and of his unknown companion with the crossbow. 'It may have been a grudge thing, I've known men to get crazy over something even more trivial than a nickname, but if it wasn't . . . If Jack was somehow involved with that assassin . . . '

'Then,' said Laurie, "the Nighthawks have turned an

officer of the Mockers to their cause.'

Jimmy looked upset, as he suddenly dropped his mask of bravado. 'That thought has troubled me as much as the .thought of someone sticking his Highness with a crossbow bolt. I've been neglecting my oath to the Mockers. I should have told all last night, and certainly I must now.' He seemed ready to rise.

Volney placed a firm hand upon Jimmy's shoulder.

'Presumptuous boy. Are you saying some league of cutthroats merits even a moment's consideration in light of the danger to your Prince and possibly your King?'

Jimmy seemed on the verge of a retort when Arutha said, "I think that's exactly what the boy said, Volney. He has given oath.'

Laurie quickly stepped over to where the boy sat.

Moving Volney to one side, he leaned down so his face was level with Jimmy's. "You have your concerns, we know, lad, but things seem to be moving rapidly. If the Mockers have been infiltrated, then speaking too soon could make those who have been placed there cover tracks. If we can get one of these Nighthawks . . .' He left the thought unfinished.

Jimmy nodded. 'if the Upright Man will only follow your logic, I may survive, singer. I come close to past the time when I may cover my actions with a facile story. Soon I will be at an accounting. Very well, I'll take a note to the Drawer of Nets' temple. And I will play no mummery when I ask her to make a place for me should it be my time.'

'And,' said Laurie, "I must be off to see an old friend about the loan of an inn.'

'Good,' said Arutha. 'We will spring the .snare tomorrow.'

While Volney, Nathan, and Gardan watched, Laurie and Jimmy departed, deep in conversation as they made plans. Arutha followed their departure as well, his dark eyes masking the quietly burning rage he felt. After so many years of strife during the Riftwar he had returned to Krondor hoping for a long, peaceful life with Anita. Now someone dared to threaten that peaceful life. And that someone would pay dearly.

The Rainbow Parrot Inn was quiet. The storm windows had been closed against a sudden squall off the Bitter Sea, so the taproom lay blanketed in haze, blue smoke from the fireplace and a dozen patron's pipes. To any casual observer the inn looked much as it would have on other rainy nights. The owner, Lucas, and his two sons stood behind the long bar, one of them occasionally moving through the door to the kitchen to get meals and carry them to the tables. In the corner near the fireplace,

opposite the stairs to the second floor, a blond minstrel sang softly of a sailor who is far from home.

Close inspection would have revealed that the men at the tables barely touched their ale. While rough in appearance, they didn't have the air of workers from the docks and sailors fresh in from sea voyages. They all possessed a certain hard-eyed look, and their scars were earned in past battles rather than tavern brawls. All were members of Gardan's company of Household Guard, some of the most seasoned veterans of the Armies of the West during the Riftwar. In the kitchen five new cooks and apprentices worked. Upstairs, in the room closest to the head of the stairway, Arutha, Gardan, and five soldiers waited patiently. In total, Arutha had placed twenty-four men in the inn. Arutha's men were the only ones present, as the last local had left when the storm commenced.

In the corner farthest from the door, Jimmy the Hand waited. Something had troubled him all day, though he couldn't put his finger on it. But he knew one thing: if he himself had entered this room this night, his experience-bred caution would have warned him away. He hoped the Nighthawks' agent wasn't as perceptive. Something here just wasn't right.

Jimmy sat back and absently nibbled at the cheese, pondering what was askew. It was an hour after sundown, and still no sign of anyone who might be from the Nighthawks. Jimmy had come straight from the temple, making sure he had been seen by several beggars who knew him well. If any in Krondor wished to find him, word of his whereabouts could be purchased easily and cheaply.

The front door opened and two men came in from the rain, shaking water from their cloaks. Both appeared to be fighting men, perhaps bravos who had earned a fair purse of silver protecting some merchant's caravans. They wore similar attire: leather armour, calf-length boots, broadswords at their sides, and shields slung over their backs under the protective cloaks.

The taller fellow, with a grey streak through his dark hair, ordered ales. The other, a thin blond man, looked about the room. Something in the way his eyes narrowed alarmed Jimmy: he also sensed something different in the inn. He spoke softly to his companion. The man with the grey lock nodded, then took the ales presented by the barman. Paying with coppers, the two men moved to the only available table, the one next to Jimmy's.

The man with the grey lock turned towards Jimmy and said, 'Lad, is this inn always so sombre?' Jimmy then realized what the problem had been all day. In their



waiting, the guards had fallen into" the soldier's habit of speaking softly. The room was free of the usual commonroom din.

Jimmy held his forefinger before his lips and whispered, "It is the singer.' The man turned his head and listened to Laurie for a moment. Laurie was a gifted performer and was in good voice despite his long day's work. When he finished, Jimmy banged his ale jack hard upon the table and shouted, ' minstrel, more, more!' as he tossed a silver coin towards the dais upon which Laurie sat. His outburst was followed a moment later by similar shouting and cheering as the others realized the need of some display. Several other coins were tossed. When Laurie struck up another tune, lively and bawdy, a sound not unlike the normal buzz of conversation returned to the taproom. The two strangers settled back into their chairs and listened, occasionally speaking to each other. They visibly relaxed as the mood in the room shifted to resemble what they had expected. Jimmy sat for a while, watching the two men at the next table. Something about these two was out of place, something that nagged at him as had the false note in the common room only moments before. The door opened again and another man entered. He looked around the room as he shook water from his hooded great cloak, but he didn't remove the voluminous COVering or lower the cowl. He spied Jimmy and crossed to his table. Without waiting for invitation, he pulled out a chair and sat. In hushed tones he said, 'Have you a name?'

Jimmy nodded and leaned forward as if to speak. As he did so, four facts suddenly struck him. The men at the next table, despite their casual appearance, had swords and shields close at hand, needing only an instant to bring them to the ready. They didn't drink like mercenaries fresh into town after a long caravan, in fact, their drinks were nearly untouched. The man opposite Jimmy had one hand hidden under his cloak, as he had since' entering. But most revealing of all, all three men wore large black rings on their left hands, with a hawk device carved in them, one similar to the talisman taken from Laughing Jack's companion. Jimmy's mind worked furiously, for he had seen such rings before and understood their use.

Improvising, Jimmy pulled a parchment out of his boot. He placed it on the table, to the far right of the man, making him stretch awkwardly across himself to reach for it while he kept his right hand hidden. As the man's hand touched the parchment, Jimmy pulled his dirk out and struck, pinning the man's hand to the table. The man froze at the sudden attack, then his other hand came from within his cloak, holding a dagger. He slashed at

jimmy as the boy thief fell backwards. Then pain struck the man and he howled in agony. Jimmy, tumbling over his chair, shouted, 'Nighthawks!' as he struck the floor. The room exploded with activity. Lucas's sons, both veterans of the Armies of the West, came leaping over the bar, landing on the swordsmen at the table next to Jimmy as they attempted to rise. Jimmy found himself hanging backwards atop the overturned chair and awkwardly tried to pull himself upright. From his position he could see the barmen grappling with the grey-lock man. The other false mercenary had his left hand before his face, his ring to his lips. Jimmy shouted, 'Poison rings! They have poison rings!' Other guards had the hooded man in their grip as he frantically tried to remove his ring from his pinned hand. After another moment he was held tightly by the three men around him, unable to move. The grey-lock man kicked out at the barmen, rolled away, leapt up, and dashed towards the door, knocking aside two men surprised by the sudden move. For a moment a clear path to the door appeared as curses filled the room from soldiers attempting to navigate the jumble of tables and chairs. The Nighthawk was nearing the door and freedom when a slender fighter interposed himself. The assassin leapt towards the door. With near-inhuman speed Arutha stepped forward and struck the grey-locked man a blow to the head with his rapier's hilt. The stunned man teetered for a moment, then collapsed to the floor, unconscious. Arutha stood erect and looked about the room. The blond assassin lay with eyes staring blankly upwards obviously dead. The hooded man's cloak was thrown back and he was white with pain as the dagger pinning his hand to the table was pulled loose. Three soldiers held him down, though he looked too weak to stand upon his own feet. When the dirk was pulled from the table, he screamed and passed out. Jimmy stepped gingerly around the dead man and came up to Arutha. He looked down to where Gardan was removing the other black ring from the man on the floor and then the boy grinned at Arutha. Holding up his hand, he counted two on his fingers. The Prince, still flushed from the struggle, smiled and nodded. None of his men appeared wounded and he had two assassins in tow. He said to Gardan, 'Guard them closely and let no one who is not known to us see them when you take them into the palace. I'll have no rumours flying around. Lucas and others may be in danger enough when these three turn up missing, should others from the Guild of Death be about. Leave enough of this company to keep up the appearance of normal business until

closing, and pay Lucas double the damages, with our thanks." Even as he spoke, Cardan's company was restoring the inn to order, removing the broken table and moving the others about so it would not be noticed missing. "Take these two to the rooms I have chosen and be quick about it. We shall begin questioning tonight."

Guards blocked a door leading to a remote wing of the palace. The rooms were used only occasionally by guests of minor importance. The wing was a recent construction, being accessible from the main buildings of the palace by a single short hall and a single outside doorway. The outside door was bolted from within and was posted with two guards without, who had orders that absolutely no one, no matter who, was to enter or leave by that door. Inside the wing all the outer rooms had been secured. In the centre of the largest room of the suite Arutha studied his two prisoners. Both were tied to stout wooden beds by heavy ropes. Arutha was taking no chances on their attempting suicide. Father Nathan supervised his acolytes, who tended the two assassins' wounds. Abruptly one of the acolytes moved away from the bedside of the man with the grey lock. He looked at Father Nathan, his face betraying confusion. "Father, come see." Jimmy and Laurie followed behind the priest and Arutha. Nathan stepped up behind the acolyte and all heard his sharp intake of breath. "Sung show us the way." The grey-locked man's leather armour had been cut away, revealing a black tunic beneath embroidered with a silver fisher's net. Nathan pulled away the other prisoner's robe. Beneath that robe was another, of night's black colour, also with a silver net over his heart. The prisoner's hand had been bandaged and he had regained consciousness. He glared defiantly at the priest of Sung, naked hatred in his eyes. Nathan motioned the Prince aside. "These men wear the mark of Iims-Kragma in her guise as the Drawer of Nets, she who gathers all to her in the end." Arutha nodded. "It fits in. We know the Nighthawks are contacted through the temple. Even should the hierarchy of the temple be ignorant of this business, someone within the temple must be a confederate of the Nighthawks. Come, Nathan, we must question this other one." They returned to the bed where the conscious man lay. Looking down upon him, Arutha said, "Who offers the price for my death?" Nathan was called to attend the unconscious man. "Who are you?" demanded the Prince of the other. "Answer now, or the pain you've endured will be merely a hint of what will be visited upon you." Arutha did not enjoy the prospect of torture, but he would not stop at

any means to discover who was responsible for the attack upon him. The question and the threat were answered by silence. After a moment Nathan returned to Arutha's side. 'The other is dead,' he said softly. 'We must treat this one cautiously. That man should not have died from your blow to the head. They may have means to command the body not to fight against death, but to welcome it. It is said even a hardy man may will himself to death, given enough time.'

Arutha noticed sweat beading upon the brow of the wounded man as Nathan examined him. With concern on his face, the priest said, 'He is fevered, 'and it rises apace. I will have to tend him before there can be an accounting.' The priest quickly fetched his potion and forced some fluid down the man's throat as soldiers held his jaws apart. Then the priest began to intone his clerical marc. The man on the bed began to writhe frantically, his face a contorted mask of concentration. Tendons stood out on his arms, and his neck was a mass of ropy cords as he struggled against his confinement. Suddenly he let forth a hollow-sounding laugh and fell back, eyes closed.

Nathan examined the man. "He is unconscious, Highness.' The priest added, 'i have slowed the fever's rise, but I don't think I can halt it. Some magic agency works here. He fails before our eyes. It will take time to counter whatever magic is at work upon him . . . if I have the time.' There was doubt in Nathan's voice. "And if my arts are equal to the task.'

Arutha turned to Gardan. 'Captain, take ten of your most trusted men and make straight for the Temple of Iims-Kragma. Inform the High Priestess I command her attendance at once. Bring her by force if needs be, but bring her.'

Gardan saluted, but there was a flicker in his eyes. Laurie and Jimmy knew he disliked the thought of bearding the priestess in her own halls. Still, the staunch captain turned and obeyed his Prince without comment. Arutha returned to the stricken man, who lay in fevered torment. Nathan said, 'Highness, the fever rises, slowly, but it rises.'

'How long will he live?'

'if we can do nothing, through the balance of the night, no longer.'

Arutha struck his left hand with his balled right fist in frustration. There was less than six hours before dawn. Less than six hours to discover the cause for the attack upon him. And should this man die, they would be back where they started, and worse, for his unknown enemy would not likely fall into another snare.

"is there anything else you can do?' asked Laurie softly. Nathan considered. 'Perhaps . . .' He moved away

from the ill man and motioned his acolytes away from the bedside. With a gesture he indicated that one of them should bring him a large volume of priestly spells. Nathan instructed the acolytes and they quickly did his bidding, knowing the ritual and their parts in it. A pentagram was chalked upon the floor, and many runic symbols laid within its boundary, with the bed at the centre. When they were finished, everyone who stood within the room was encompassed by the chalk marks upon the floor. A lighted candle was placed at every point of the design, and a sixth given to Nathan, who stood studying the book. Nathan began waving the light in an intricate pattern while he read aloud in a language unknown to the nonclerics in the room. His acolytes stood quietly to one side, responding in unison at several points during the incantation. The others felt a strange stilling of the air, and as the final syllables were uttered, the dying man groaned, a low and piteous sound. Nathan snapped shut the book. "Nothing less powerful than an agent of the gods themselves may pass through the boundaries of the pentagram without my leave. No spirit, demon, or being sent by any dark agency can trouble us now." Nathan then directed everyone to stand outside the pentagram, opened the book again, and began reading another chant. Quickly the words tumbled from the stocky priest. He finished the spell and pointed at the man upon the bed. Arutha looked at the ill man but could see nothing amiss, then, as he turned to speak to Laurie, noticed a change. Seeing the man from the corner of his eye, Arutha could discern a nimbus of faint light around him, filling the pentagram, not visible when viewed directly. It was a light, milky quartz in colour. Arutha asked, "What is this?" Nathan faced Arutha. "I have slowed his passage through time, Highness. To him an hour is now a moment. The spell will last only until dawn, but to him less than a quarter of an hour will have passed. Thus we gain time. With luck, he will now linger until midday." "Can we speak to him?" "No, for we would sound like buzzing bees to him. But if we need, I can remove the spell." Arutha regarded the slowly writhing, fevered man. His hand seemed poised a scant inch above the bed, hanging in space. "Then," said the Prince impatiently, "we must wait upon the pleasure of the High Priestess of Ims-Kragma."

The wait was not long, nor was there much pleasure evident in the manner of the High Priestess. There was a commotion outside, and Arutha hurried to the door. Beyond it he found Gardan waiting with a woman in black robes. Her face was hidden behind a thick, gauzy

black veil, but her head turned towards the Prince. A finger shot out towards Arutha, and a deep, pleasant-sounding feminine voice said, "Why have I been commanded here, Prince of the Kingdom?"

"Arutha ignored the question as he took in the scene.

Behind Gardan stood a quartet of Guards, spears held across their chests, barring the way to a group of determined-looking temple guards wearing the black and silver tabards of Iims-Kragma. "What passes, Captain?" Gardan said, "The lady wishes to bring her guards within, and I have forbidden it."

In tones of icy fury the priestess said, "I have come as you bid, though never have the clergy acknowledged temporal authority. But I will not come as a prisoner, not even for you, Prince of Krondor."

Arutha said, "Two guards may enter, but they will stand away from the prisoner. Madam, you will cooperate and enter, now." Arutha's tone left little doubt of his mood. The High Priestess might be commander of a powerful sect, but before her stood the ruler of the Kingdom absolute, save the King, a man who would brook no interference in some matter of paramount importance. She nodded to the two foremost guards, and they entered. The door was closed behind them, and the two guards were taken off to one side by Gardan. Outside, the palace guards kept watchful eyes upon the remaining temple guards and the wicked curved swords carried at their belts.

Father Nathan greeted the High Priestess with a stiffly formal bow, their two orders having little affection for each other. The High Priestess chose to ignore the priest's presence.

Her first remark upon seeing the pentagram upon the floor was "Do you fear otherworld interference?" Her tone was suddenly analytical and even.

It was Nathan who answered. "Lady, we are not sure of many things, but we do seek to prevent complications from whatever source, physical or spiritual."

She did not acknowledge his words but stepped as close to the two men, one dead and the other wounded, as she could. Seeing the black tunics, she faltered a step, then turned to face Arutha. Through the veil he could almost feel her malevolent gaze upon him. "These men are of my order. How do they come to lie here?"

Arutha's face was a mask of controlled anger. "Madam, it is to answer that question that you have been fetched. Do you know these two?"

She studied their faces. "I do not know this one," she said, pointing to the dead man with the grey lock in his hair. "But the other is a priest of my temple, named Morgan, newly come to us from our temple in Yabon."

She paused for a moment as she considered something. 'He wears the mark of a brother of the Order of the Silver Net.' Her head came around, facing Arutha once more. 'They are the martial arm of our faith, supervised by their Grand Master in Rillanon. And he answers to none save our Mother Matriarch for his order's practices.' She paused again. 'And then only sometimes.' Before anyone could comment, she continued. 'What I do not understand is how one of my temple priests came to wear their mark. Is he a member of the order, passing himself off as a priest? Is he a priest playing the part of a warrior? Or is he neither priest nor brother of the order, but an impostor on both counts? Any of those three possibilities is forbidden, at risk of lims-Kragma's wrath. Why is he here?'

Arutha said, 'Madam, if what you say is true' - she seemed to tense at the implication of a 'possible falsehood' then what is occurring concerns your temple as much as it concerns me. Jimmy, speak what you know of the Nighthawks . '

Jimmy, obviously uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the Death Goddess's High Priestess, spoke quickly and forwent his usual embellishments. When he finished, the High Priestess said, 'Highness, what you say is a deed foul in the nostrils of our goddess.' Her voice was cold rage. in times past, certain of the faithful sought sacrifices, but those practices are long abandoned. Death is a patient goddess, all will come to know her in time. We need no black murders. I would speak to this man.' She indicated the prisoner.

Arutha hesitated and noticed Father Nathan shaking his head slightly. 'He is close to death, less than hours without any additional stress upon him. Should the questioning prove rigorous, he might die before we can plumb the depths of these dark waters.'

The High Priestess said, 'What cause for concern, priest? Even dead, he is still my subject. I am LimaKragma's ephemeral hand. In her manor I will find truths no living man can obtain.'

Father Nathan bowed. 'in the realm of death, so you are supreme.' To Arutha he said, 'May my brothers and I withdraw, Highness? My order finds these practices offensive.'

The Prince nodded, and the High Priestess said, 'Before you go, remove the prayer of slowness you have called down upon him. It will cause less difficulty than should I do it.'

Nathan quickly complied and the man on the bed began to groan feverishly. The priest and acolytes of Sung hurriedly left the room, and when they were gone, the High Priestess said, 'This pentagram will aid in

keeping outside forces from interfering with this act. I would ask all to remain outside, for within its bounds each person creates ripples in the fabric of magic. This is a most holy rite, for whatever the outcome, our lady will most surely claim this man.'

Arutha and the others waited outside the pentagram and the priestess said, 'Speak only when I have given permission, and ensure the candles do not burn out, or forces may be loosed that would prove . . . troublesome to recall.' The High Priestess drew back her black veil, and Arutha was almost shocked at her appearance. She looked barely more than a girl, and a lovely one at that, with blue eyes and skin the colour of dawn's blush. Her eyebrows promised her hair would be the palest gold. She raised her hands overhead and began to pray. Her voice was soft, musical, but the words were strange and fearful to hear.

The man on the bed squirmed as she continued her incantation. Suddenly his eyes opened and he stared upwards. He seemed to convulse, straining at the beads that restrained him. He relaxed, then turned to face the High Priestess. A distant look crossed his face, as his eyes seemed to focus and unfocus in turn. After a moment a strange, sinister smile formed on his lips, an expression of mocking cruelty. His mouth opened and the voice that issued forth was deep and hollow. 'What service, mistress?'

The High Priestess's brow furrowed slightly as if there was something askew in his manner, but she maintained her poise and said in commanding tones, "You wear the mantle of the Order of the Silver Net, yet you practise in the temple. Explain this falsehood.'

The man laughed, a high shrieking cackle that trailed off. 'I am he who serves.'

She stopped, for the answer was not to her liking.

'Answer then, who do you serve?'

There came another laugh and the man's body tensed once more, pulling against the restraining ropes. Beads of sweat popped out upon his brow, and the muscles of his arms corded as he drew himself against the ropes. Then he relaxed and laughed again. 'I am he who is caught.'

"Who do you serve?'

'I am he who is a fish. I am in a net.' Again came the mad laughter and the near-convulsive straining at the ropes. As the man strained, sweat poured off his face in rivulets. Shrieking, he pulled again and again at the restraints. As it seemed he would break his own bones with exertion, the man screamed, "Murmandamus! Aid your servant!'

Abruptly one of the candles blew out as a wind from some unknown



place swept across the room. The man reacted with a single convulsive spasm, bowing his body in a high arch, with only his feet and head touching the bed, pulling against the ropes with such force that his skin tore and bled. Suddenly he collapsed upon the bed. The High Priestess fell back a step, then crossed to look down on the man. Softly she said, 'He is dead. Relight the candle.'

Arutha motioned and a guard lit a taper from another candle and relit the extinguished one. The priestess began another incantation. While the first had been mildly discomforting, this one carried a feeling of dread, a chill from the farthest corner of some lost and frozen land of wretchedness. It carried the echo of the cries of those without comfort or hope. Yet within it was another quality, powerful and attractive, an almost seductive feeling that it would somehow be wonderful to lay aside all burdens and rest. As the spell continued, the feelings of foreboding increased, and those who waited fought against the desire to run far from the sound of the High Priestess's spell casting.

Suddenly the spell was over, and the room lay as quiet as a tomb. The High Priestess spoke in the King's Tongue. 'You who are with us in body but are now subject to the will of our mistress, Ims-Kragma, hearken to me. As our Lady of Death commands all things in the end, so do I now command you in her name. Return!'

The form on the bed stirred but lay silent once more ~ The High Priestess shouted, "Return!" and the figure moved again. With a sudden movement the dead man's head came up and his eyes opened. He seemed to be looking around the room, but while his eyes were open, they remained rolled back up in his head, only the whites showing. Still there was some feeling that the corpse could yet see, for his head stopped moving as if he was looking at the High Priestess. His mouth opened and a distant, hollow laugh issued from it.

The High Priestess stepped forward. "Silence!"

The dead man quieted, but then the face grinned, a slowly broadening, terrible, and evil expression. The features began to twitch, moving as if the man's face were subject to some strange palsy. The very flesh shivered, then sagged, as if turned to heated wax. The skin colour subtly shifted, becoming fairer, almost pale white. The forehead became higher and the chin more delicate, the nose more arched and the ears pointed. The hair darkened to black. Within moments the man they had questioned was gone and in his place lay a form no longer human.

Softly Laurie spoke. 'By the gods! A Brother of the Dark Path!'

Jimmy shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Your Brother Morgan is from a lot farther north than Yabon city, lady," he whispered. There was no humour in his tone, only fear.

Again came the chill wind from some unknown quarter, and the High Priestess turned towards Arutha. Her eyes were wide with fear and she seemed to speak, but none could hear her words.

The creature on the bed, one of the hated dark cousins to the elves, shrieked in maniacal glee. With a shocking and sudden display of strength, the moredhel ripped one arm free of its bond, then the other. Before the guards could react, it tore free the bonds holding its legs. Instantly the dead thing was on its feet, leaping towards the High Priestess.

The woman stood resolute, a feeling of power radiating from her. She pointed her hand at the creature. 'Halt!'

The moredhel obeyed. 'By my mistress's power, I command obedience from you who are called. In her domain do you dwell and subject you are to her laws and ministers. By her power do I order you back!'

The moredhel faltered a moment, then with startling quickness reached out and with one hand seized the High Priestess by the throat. In that hollow, distant voice it screamed, 'Trouble not my servant, lady. If you love your mistress so dearly, then to her go!'

The High Priestess gripped its wrist, and blue fire sprang to life along the creature's arm. With a howl of pain it picked her up as if she weighed nothing and hurled her against the wall near Arutha, where she crashed and slid to the floor. All stood motionless. The transformation of this creature and its unexpected attack upon the High Priestess robbed all in the room of volition. The temple guards were rooted by the sight of their priestess humbled by some dark, otherworld power. Gardan and his men were equally stunned. With another booming howl of laughter the creature turned towards Arutha.

"Now, Lord of the West, we are met, and it is your hour!" The moredhel swayed upon its feet a moment, then stepped towards Arutha. The temple guards recovered an instant before Gardan's men. The two black-and-silver-clad soldiers leapt forward, one interposing himself between the advancing moredhel and the stunned priestess, the other attacking the creature. Arutha's soldiers were only a step behind in preventing the creature from reaching Arutha. Laurie sprang for the door, shouting for the guards without.

The temple guard thrust with his scimitar and impaled the moredhel. Sightless eyes widened, showing red rims, as the creature grinned, a horrid expression of glee. In an instant its hands shot forward and were around the guard's throat. With a twisting motion it broke the guard's

neck, then tossed him aside. The first of Arutha's guards to reach the creature struck from the side, a blow that gouged a bloody furrow along its back. With a backhand slap it knocked the guard down. It reached down and pulled the scimitar out of its own chest and with a snarl tossed it aside. As it turned away, Gardan hit it low and from behind. The huge captain encircled the creature with his powerful arms, lifting it from the ground. The creature's claws raked Gardan's arms, but still he held it high, preventing its progress towards Arutha. Then the creature kicked backwards, its heel striking Gardan in the 'leg, causing both to fall. The creature rose. As Gardan tried to reach it again, he stumbled over the body of the fallen temple guard.

The door flew open as Laurie tossed aside the inner bar, and palace and temple guards raced past the singer. The creature was within a sword's thrust of Arutha when the first guard tackled it from behind, followed an instant later by two more. The temple guards joined their lone fellow in forming a defence around the unconscious High Priestess. Arutha's guards joined in the assault upon the moredhel. Gardan recovered from his fall and rushed to Arutha's side. 'Leave, Highness. We can hold it here by weight of numbers.'

Arutha, with sword ready, said, 'How long, Gardan? How can you stop a creature already dead?'

. Jimmy the Hand backed away from Arutha's side, moving towards the door. He couldn't take his eyes from the knot of writhing bodies. guards hammered' at the creature with hilts and fists, seeking to bludgeon it into submission. Hands and faces were sticky red as the creature's claws raked out again and again.

Laurie circled around the melee, looking for an opening, his sword pointed like a dagger. Catching sight of Jimmy as the thief bolted towards the door, Laurie shouted, 'Arutha, Jimmy shows uncommon good sense. Leave!' then he thrust with his sword and a low, chilling moan came from within the jumble of bodies.

Arutha was gripped by indecision. The mass seemed to be inching towards him, as if the weight of the guards served only to slow the creature's progress. The creature's voice rang out. 'Flee, if you will, Lord of the West, but you shall never find refuge from my servants.' As if gifted by some additional surge of power, the moredhel heaved mightily and the guards were cast aside. They crashed into those standing before the High Priestess, and for a moment the creature was free to stand upright. Now it was covered in blood, its face a mask of bleeding wounds. Torn flesh hung from one cheek, transforming the moredhel's face into a permanent, baleful grin. One guard managed to rise and shatter the creature's right arm with

a sword blow. It spun and tore the man's throat out with a single rake of its hand. With its right arm dangling uselessly at its side, the moredhel spoke through loose, rubbery lips, its voice a bubbling, wet noise. "I feed on death! Come. I shall feed on yours!"

Two soldiers jumped upon the moredhel from behind, driving it to the floor once more, before Arutha. Ignoring the guards, the creature clawed towards the Prince, its good arm outstretched, fingers hooked like a claw. More guards leapt upon it, and Arutha darted forward, driving his sword through the creature's shoulder, deep into its back. The monstrous figure shuddered briefly, then resumed its forward motion.

Like some giant, obscene crab, the mass of bodies inched slowly towards the Prince. The activities of the guards increased, as if they would protect Arutha by literally tearing the creature to shreds. Arutha took a step back, his reluctance to flee slowly overbalanced by the refusal of the moredhel to be stopped. With a cry, a soldier was tossed away, to land hard, his head striking the stone floor with an audible crack. Another shouted 'Highness, it grows in strength!' A third screamed as he had an eye clawed out by the frantic creature. With a titanic heave, it tossed the remaining soldiers away and rose, with no one between itself and Arutha.

Laurie tugged at Arutha's left sleeve, leading the Prince slowly towards the door. They walked sideways, never taking their eyes from the loathsome creature, while it stood swaying upon its feet. Its sightless eyes followed the two men, glaring from a skull rendered a pulpy red mask devoid of recognizable features. One of the High Priestess's guards charged the creature from behind, and without looking, the moredhel lashed backwards with its right hand and crushed the man's skull with a single blow. Laurie cried, 'it has the use of its arm once more. It's healing itself.' the creature was upon them in a leap. Suddenly Arutha felt himself going down as someone shoved him aside. In a blur of images, Arutha saw Laurie ducking away from the blow that would have torn Arutha's head from his shoulders. Arutha rolled away and came to his feet beside Jimmy the Hand. The boy had knocked him out of harm's way. Beyond Jimmy, Arutha could see Father Nathan.

' The bull-necked priest approached the monster, his left hand held upright, palm forward. The creature somehow sensed the priest's approach, for it turned its attention from Arutha and spun to face Nathan.

The centre of Nathan's hand began to glow, then shine with a fierce white light that cast a visible beam upon the moredhel, which stood transfixed. From its torn lips a thin moan was emitted. Then Nathan began to chant.

'A high shriek erupted from the moredhel, and it cowered, covering sightless eyes from the glare of Nathan's mystic light. Its voice could be heard, low and Wailing. "it burns . . . it burns!" the stocky cleric took a Step forward, forcing the creature to shamle backwards. The thing looked nothing mortal, bleeding thick, nearly coagulated blood from a hundred wounds, large pieces of flesh and clothing dangling from its form. It hunkered lower and cried out, 'I burn!'

Then a cold wind blew in the room and the creature shrieked, loud enough to startle even seasoned, battle-ready soldiers. Guards looked furiously about, seeking the source of some nameless horror that could be felt on every side.

The creature suddenly rose up, as if new power had come into it. Its right hand shot out, grabbing at the source of the burning light, Nathan's left hand. Fingers and talon-like fingers interlaced, and with a searing sound the creature's hand began to smoke. The moredhel drew back its left hand to strike a blow at the cleric, but as it uncoiled to strike, Nathan shouted a word unknown to the others In the room, and the creature faltered and groaned. Nathan's voice rang out, filling the room with the sounds of mystic prayer and holy magic. The creature froze for an instant, then trembled in place. Nathan stepped up the urgency of his incantation and the creature reeled as if being struck a mighty blow, and smoke rose from its body. Nathan called down the power of his goddess, Sung the White, the deity of purity, his voice hoarse and strained. A loud moaning, seeming to come from a great distance, escaped from the moredhel's mouth and it shuddered again. Locked in this mystic battle, Nathan liNed his shoulders as if he were struggling to move away a great weight, and the moredhel fell to its knees. Its right hand bent backwards as Nathan's voice droned on. Beads of sweat rolled down the priest's forehead and the cords on his neck stood out. Blisters rose on the creature's ragged flesh and exposed muscle and it began an ululating cry. A sizzling sound and the smell of cooking meat filled the room. Thick oily smoke poured off its body, and one guard turned his head and vomited. Nathan's eyes grew wide as he exerted the force of his will upon this creature. Slowly they swayed, the creature's flesh cracking as it blackened and crisped from Nathan's magic. The moredhel beat backwards under the force of the priest's grip, and suddenly blue energy coursed over its blackening body. Nathan released his hold and the creature toppled sideways, flames erupting from its eyes, mouth, and ears. Soon flames engulfed the body and reduced it quickly to ashes, choking the room with a foul, greasy odour.

Nathan slowly turned to face Arutha, and the Prince saw a man suddenly aged. The cleric's eyes were wide and sweat poured down his face. In a dry croak he said, "highness, it is done." Taking one slow step, then another, towards the Prince, Nathan smiled weakly. Then he fell forward, to be caught by Arutha before he struck the floor. 4

## Revelations

Birds sang to welcome the new dawn.

Arutha, Laurie, Jimmy, Volney, and Gardan sat in the Prince's private audience chamber awaiting word of Nathan and the High Priestess. The temple guards had carried the priestess to a guest chamber and stood guard while healers summoned from her temple attended her. They had been with her all night, while members of Nathan's order tended him in his quarters.

. Everyone in the room had been rendered silent by the horrors of the night, and all were reluctant to speak of it. Laurie stirred first from the numbness, leaving his chair to move to a window.

Arutha's eyes followed Laurie's movement, but his mind was wrestling with a dozen unanswerable questions.

Who or what was seeking his death? And why? But more important to him than his own safety was the question of what threat this posed for Lyam, Carline, and the others due to arrive soon. And most of all, was there any risk to Anita? A dozen times over the last few hours Arutha had considered postponing the wedding.

Laurie sat down on a couch next to the half-dozing Jimmy. Quietly he asked, 'Jimmy, how did you know to fetch Father Nathan when the High Priestess herself was helpless?' Jimmy stretched and yawned. "It was something I remembered from my youth." At this, Gardan laughed and the tension in the room lessened. Even Arutha ventured a half-smile as Jimmy continued. "I was given into the tutelage of one Father Timothy, a cleric of Astalon, for a time. Occasionally one boy or another is allowed to do this. It's a sign the Mockers have great expectations for the boy," he said proudly. "I stayed only to learn my letters and numbers, but along the way I chanced to pick up a few other bits of knowledge.

'I remembered a discourse on the nature of the gods Father Timothy had given once - though it had almost put me to sleep. According to that worthy, there is an opposition of forces, positive and negative forces that are sometimes called good and evil. Good cannot cancel good, nor evil cancel evil. To balk an agent of evil, you need an agency of good. The High Priestess is counted a servant of dark powers by most people and could not

hold the creature at bay. I hoped the father could oppose the creature, as Sung and her servants are seen as being of "good" demeanour. I really didn't know if it was possible, but I couldn't see standing around while that thing chewed up the palace guards one by one.'

Arutha said, (it proved a good guess.' His tone revealed approval of Jimmy's quick thinking.

A guard came into the room and said, 'Highness, the priest is recovered and sends word for you. He begs you to come to his quarters.' Arutha nearly leapt from his chair and strode out of the chamber with the others close behind.

For over a century custom had provided that the palace of the Prince of Krondor contain a temple with a shrine to each of the gods, so that whoever was a guest, no matter which of the major deities he worshipped, would find a place of spiritual comfort close by. The order seeing to the temple's care would change from time to time as different advisers to the Prince came and went. It was Nathan and his acolytes who cared for the temple under Arutha's administration, as they had during Erland's. The priest's quarters lay behind the temple, and Arutha entered through the large, vaulted hall. At the opposite end of the nave a door could be glimpsed behind the bema that contained the shrine to the four greater gods. Arutha strode towards the door, his boots clacking upon the stone floor as he walked past the shrines to the lesser gods on either side of the temple. As he approached the door to Nathan's quarters, Arutha could see it was open and glimpsed movement inside. He entered the priest's quarters and Nathan's acolytes stepped aside. Arutha was struck by the austere look of the room, nearly a cell without personal property or decoration. The only nonutilitarian item visible was a personal statuette of Sung, represented as a lovely young woman in a long white robe, resting on a small table next to Nathan's bed.

The priest looked haggard and weak but alert. He lay propped up on cushions. Nathan's assistant priest hovered close by, ready to answer any need Nathan might have.

The royal churgeon waited beside the bed. He bowed and said, "There is nothing physically wrong, Highness, save he is exhausted. Please be brief.' Arutha nodded as the churgeon, followed by all the acolytes, withdrew.

As he left, he motioned for Gardan and the others to remain outside. Arutha came to Nathan's side.

"How do you fare?"

'I will live, Highness,' he answered weakly.

Arutha cast a quick glance at the door and saw the alarmed expression on Gardan's face. It confirmed Arutha's impression that Nathan's ordeal had left him

changed. Softly Arutha said, 'You will do more than just live, Nathan. You'll be back to your old self soon.'

'I have lived through a horror no man should have to face, Highness. So you may understand, I must share a confidence with you.' He nodded towards the door.

The assistant priest closed the door and returned to Nathan's bedside. Nathan said, "I must now tell you something not commonly known outside the temple, Highness. I take great responsibility upon myself to do this, but I judge it imperative.'

Arutha leaned forward the better to hear the tired priest's faint words. Nathan said, There is an order to things, Arutha, a balance imposed by Ishap, the One Above All. The greater gods rule through the lesser gods, who are served by the priesthoods. Each order has its mission. An order may seem to be in opposition to another, but the higher truth is that all orders have a place in the scheme of things. Even those in the temples who are of lower rank are kept ignorant of this higher order. It is the reason for occasional conflicts erupting between temples. My discomfort at the High Priestess's rites last night was as much for the benefit of my acolytes as from any true distaste. What an individual is capable of understanding determines how much of the truth is revealed to him by the temples. Many need the simple concepts of good and evil, light and dark, to govern their daily lives. You are not such a one.

'I have trained in the Following of the Single Path, the order I am best suited for by my nature. But as do all others who have reached my rank. I know well the nature and manifestations of the other gods and goddesses. What appeared in that room last night was nothing I have ever known . '

Arutha seemed lost. 'What do you mean?'

'As I battled against the force that drove the moredhel I' could sense something of its nature. It is something alien, dark and dread, something without mercy. It rages and it seeks to dominate or destroy. Even those gods called dark, Iims-Kragma and Guts-wa, are not truly evil when the truth is understood. But this thing is a blotting out of the light of hope. It is despair incarnate.'

The assistant priest indicated it was time for Arutha to leave. As he moved towards the door, Nathan called out. 'Wait, you must understand something more. It left, not because I had bested it, but because I had robbed it of the servant it inhabited. It had no physical means of continuing the attack. I only defeated its agent. It . . . revealed something of itself in that moment. 'It is not ready yet to face my Lady of the One Path, but it holds her and the other gods in contempt.' His face revealed his alarm. 'Arutha, it feels contempt for the gods!' Nathan



sat up, his hand outstretched, and Arutha returned and took it. 'Highness, it is a force that deems itself supreme. It hates and it rages and it means to destroy any who oppose it. If -'

Arutha said, 'Softly, Nathan.'

The priest nodded and lay back. 'Seek greater wisdom than mine, Arutha. For one other thing did I sense. This foe, this encompassing darkness, is growing in strength.'

Arutha said, 'Sleep, Nathan. Let this all become just another bad dream.' He nodded to the assistant priest and left the room. As he passed the royal surgeon, he said, 'Aid him,' a plea more than a command.

Hours went by as Arutha awaited word of the High Priestess of Ims-Kragma. He sat alone, while Jimmy slept on a low settee. Gardan was off seeing to the deployment of his guards. Volney was busy with running the Principality, as Arutha was preoccupied with the mysteries of the previous night. He had decided against informing Lyam of exactly what had occurred until the King was in Krondor. As he had observed before, with Lyam's retinue numbering in excess of a hundred soldiers, it would take something in the order of a small army to imperil him. Arutha paused for a moment in his deliberation to study Jimmy. He looked still a child as he breathed slowly. He had laughed off the severity of his wound, but once things had finally quieted down, he had fallen asleep almost instantly. Gardan had gently lifted him onto the couch. Arutha shook his head slightly. The youth was a common criminal, a parasite upon society who had not worked an honest day's labour in his young life. Not much past fourteen or fifteen, he was a braggart, a liar, and a thief, but while he might be many things, he was still a friend. Arutha sighed and wondered what to do about the boy. A court page arrived with a message from the High Priestess, requesting Arutha's presence at once. The Prince rose quietly, so as not to awaken Jimmy, and followed the page to where the High Priestess was being cared for by her healers. Arutha's guards waited outside the suite and temple guards stood inside the door, a concession Arutha had granted when requested by the priest who had come from the temple. The priest greeted Arutha coolly, as if Arutha somehow bore the responsibility for his mistress's injury. He led Arutha into the sleeping chamber, where a priestess attended the leader of their temple. Arutha was shocked by the appearance of the high Priestess. She lay propped up by a pile of bolsters, her pale blond hair framing a face drained of colour, as if the icy blue of winter had suffused her features. She looked as if she had aged twenty years in a day. But as she turned her gaze upon Arutha, there was still an aura of power about her.

'Have you recovered, madam?' Arutha's tone showed concern as he inclined his head towards her.

'My mistress has work for me yet, Highness. I will not join her for some time.'

'I am pleased to hear that news. I have come as you required.'

The woman drew herself upright, until she sat with her back against the pillows. Without conscious thought she brushed back her nearly white hair, and Arutha could see that despite the grim demeanour the High Priestess was a woman of unusual beauty, albeit a beauty without a hint of softness. In a voice still strained, the priestess said, 'Arutha conDoin, there is peril to our Kingdom, and more. In the realm of the Mistress of Death. only one stands higher than I; she is our Mother Matriarch in Rillanon. Other than herself. none should challenge my power in the domain of death. But now there comes something that challenges the very goddess herself. something that while still weak, while still learning its powers, can overcome my control over one in my mistress's realm.'

'Have you any understanding of the importance of my words? It is as if a baby fresh from her mother's teat has come to your palace, nay, the palace of your brother the King, and turned his retinue, his guards, even the very people against him, rendering him helpless in the very seat of his power. That is what we face. And it grows. As we stand speaking, it grows in strength and rage. And it is' ancient. . . .' Her eyes grew wide, and suddenly Arutha saw a hint of madness'. 'it is both new and old . . I don't understand . '

Arutha nodded towards the healer and turned to the priest. The priest indicated the door and Arutha started to leave. As he reached the door, the High Priestess's voice broke into sobbing. When they reached the outer room, the priest said, 'Highness, I am Julian, Chief Priest of the Inner Circle.

I've sent word to our mother'temple in Rillanon of what has happened here. I. . .' He appeared troubled by what he was about to say. Most likely I will be High Priest of lims-Kragma within a few months' time. We shall care for her,' he said, facing the closed door, "but she will never again be able to guide us in our mistress's service.'

He returned his attention to Arutha. 'I have heard from the temple guards of what occurred last night, and I have just heard the High Priestess's words. If the temple can help, we will.' Arutha considered the man's words. It was usual for a priest of one of the orders to be numbered among the councillors of the nobility. There were too many matters of mystic importance to be faced for the nobility to be without spiritual guidance. That was why Arutha's father had been the first to include a magician in his company of advisers. But active cooperation between temple and

temporal authority, between ruling bodies themselves was rare. Finally Arutha said, 'My thanks, Julian. When we have a better sense of what we are dealing with, we shall seek out your wisdom. I have just come to understand that my view of the world is somewhat narrow. I expect you will provide valued assistance.'

The priest bowed his head. As Arutha made to leave, he said, 'Highness?' Arutha looked back to see a concerned expression on the priest's face. "Yes?")

'Find whatever this thing is, Highness. Seek it out, and destroy it utterly.' Arutha could only nod. He made his way back to his chamber. Entering, he sat quietly, lest he disturb Jimmy, who still lay sleeping upon the settee. Arutha noticed that a plate of fruit and cheese and a decanter of chilled wine had been placed upon the table for him. Realizing he had had nothing to eat all day, he poured himself a glass of wine and cut a wedge of cheese. then sat down again. He put his boots on the table and leaned back, letting his mind wander. The fatigue of two nights with little sleep washed over him, but his mind was too caught up in the events of the last two days to let sleep be considered for even a moment. Some supernatural agent was loose in his realm, some magic thing that threw fear into priests of two of the most powerful temples in the Kingdom. Lyam would arrive in less than a week. Nearly every noble in the Kingdom would be in Krondor for the wedding. In his city. And he could think of nothing he could do to guarantee their safety.

Arutha sat for an hour, his mind miles away as he absently ate and drank. He was a man who often descended into dark brooding when left alone, but when given a problem he never ceased to work on it, to attack it from every possible side, to worry it, tossing it about, as a terrier does a rat. He conjured up dozens of possible approaches to the problem and constantly re-examined every shred of information he had. Finally, after discarding a dozen plans. he knew what he must do. He took his feet off the table and grabbed a ripe apple off the dish before him.

.Jimmy.' he shouted, and the boy thief was instantly awake, years of dangerous living having bred the habit of light sleeping. Arutha threw the apple at the boy and with astonishing speed he sat up and caught the fruit scant inches from his face. Arutha could understand how he had come to be known as 'the Hand'.

.What?' inquired the boy as he bit into the fruit.

'I need you to carry a message to your master.' Jimmy stopped in mid-bite. 'I need you to arrange a meeting between myself and the Upright Man.'

Jimmy's eyes widened in utter disbelief.

Again thick fog had rolled in off the Bitter Sea to blanket Krondor in a deep mantle of haze. Two figures moved quickly past the few taverns still open for business. Arutha followed as Jimmy led him through the city, passing out of the Merchants' Quarter into rougher environs, 'until they were deep within the heart of the Poor quarter. Then a quick turn down an alley and they stood before a dead end. Emerging from the shadows, three men appeared as if by magic. Arutha had his rapier out in an instant, but Jimmy only said, 'We are pilgrims who seek guidance.'

'Pilgrims, I am the guide.' came the answer from the foremost man. 'Now, tell your friend to put up his toad sticker or we'll deliver him up in a sack.'

If the men knew Arutha's identity, they were giving no sign. Arutha slowly put away his sword. The other two men came forward, holding out blindfolds. Arutha said, 'What business is this?'

'This is the way you will travel,' answered the spokesman. 'if you refuse, you will go not one step farther.'

Arutha fought down irritation and nodded, once. The men came forward and Arutha saw Jimmy blindfolded an instant before he was roughly denied light himself. Struggling against the urge to pull the blindfold away, Arutha heard the man speak. 'You will both be led from here to another place, where others will come to guide you. You may be passed along through many hands before you reach your destination, so do not become alarmed should you hear unexpected voices in the dark. I do not know what your ultimate destination is, for I do not need to know. I also do not know who you are, man,) but orders have come down from one most highly placed that you are to be led quickly and delivered unharmed. But be warned: remove your blindfold only at grave risk. You may not know where you are from this moment henceforth.' Arutha felt a rope being tied around his waist and heard the speaker say, 'Hold tightly to the rope and keep a sure foot, we travel at good pace.'

Without further word, Arutha was jerked around and led off into the night.

For more than an hour, or so it seemed to the Prince, he had been led about the streets of Krondor. He had twice stumbled and had bruises to show for the casual care given by his guides. At least three times he had changed guides, so he had no idea whom he would see when the blindfold was removed. But at last he climbed a flight of stairs. He heard several doors open and shut before strong hands forced him to sit. At last the blindfold was removed and Arutha blinked as he was dazzled by the light. Arrayed along a table was a series of lanterns, with a

polished reflector behind each, all turned to face him. Each cast a brilliant illumination into the Prince's eyes, preventing him from seeing anyone who stood behind that table.

Arutha looked to his right and saw Jimmy sitting upon another stool. After a long moment a deep voice rumbled from behind the lights. 'Greetings, Prince of Krondor.'

Arutha squinted against the light, but could catch no glimpse of who spoke from behind the glare. 'Am I speaking to the Upright Man?'

A long pause preceded the answer.

'Be satisfied that I am empowered to reach any understanding you may desire. I speak with his voice.'

Arutha considered for a moment. "Very well. I seek an alliance.'

From behind the glare came a deep chuckle. 'What would the Prince of cronder need of the Upright Man's aid?'

'I seek to learn the secrets of the Guild of Death.'

A long silence followed on the heels of this statement.

Arutha couldn't decide if the speaker was consulting another person or simply thinking. Then the voice behind the lanterns said, 'Remove the boy and hold him outside.'

Two men appeared from out of the dark and roughly grabbed Jimmy, hauling him from the room. When he was gone, the voice said, "The Nighthawks are a source of concern for the Upright Man, Prince of Krondor. They trespass upon the Thieves' Highway and their black murders stir up the populace, casting unwelcome light upon the Mockers' many activities. In short, they are bad for business. It would serve us to see them ended, but what cause have you beyond that which normally occupies a ruler when his subjects are being wantonly murdered in their sleep?'

'They pose a threat to my brother and myself.'

Again there was a long silence. 'Then they set their sights high. Still, royalty often needs killing as much as the commons, and a man must earn a living howsoever he may, even though he be an assassin.'

'it should be apparent to you,' said Arutha dryly, 'that murdering Princes would be especially. bad for business.

The Mockers would find things a little cramped working in a city under martial law.'

"This is true. Name your bargain.'

'I ask no bargain. I demand cooperation. I need information.

I wish to know where lies the heart of the

Nighthawks.'

'Altruism accrues little benefit to those lying cold in the gutter. The arm of the Guild of Death is long.'

'No longer than mine,' said Arutha in a voice devoid of humour. 'I can see that the activities of the Mockers

suffer greatly. You know as well as I what would happen to the Mockers should the Prince of Krondor declare war upon your guild.'

'There is little profit in such contention between the guild and Your Highness.'

Arutha leaned forward, his dark eyes gleaming from the brilliant lights. Slowly, biting off each word, he said, 'I have no need of profit.'

A moment of silence was followed by a deep sigh.

'Yes, there is that,' said the voice thoughtfully. Then it chuckled. 'That is one of the advantages to inheriting one's position. It would prove troublesome to govern a guild of starving thieves. Very well, Arutha of Krondor, but for this risk the guild needs indemnity. You've shown the stick, now what of the carrot?'

'Name your price.' Arutha sat back.

'Understand this: the Upright Man is sympathetic to Your Highness regarding the problems posed by the Guild of Death. The Nighthawks are not to be endured. They must be eliminated root and branch. But many risks are involved, and great expense will be incurred this will be a costly venture.'

'Your price?' Arutha repeated flatly.

'For the risk involved to all should we fail, ten thousand golden sovereigns.'

'That would put a large hole in the royal treasury.'

'True, but consider the alternatives.'

'We have a bargain.'

'I shall provide the Upright Man's instructions as to the means of payment later,' the voice said with a hint of humour in it. 'Now there is another matter.'

'What is that?' said Arutha.

'Young Jimmy the Hand has broken oath with the Mockers and his life is forfeit. He shall die within the hour.'

Without thinking, Arutha began to rise. Strong hands pushed him down from behind as a large thief stepped out of the darkness. He simply shook his head in the negative.

'We would never think of returning you to the palace in less salubrious condition than that in which you arrived,' said the voice behind the lights, 'but draw a weapon in this room and you will be delivered to the palace gate in a box and we will deal then with the consequences.'

'But Jimmy -'

'Broke oath!' interrupted the voice. 'He was honourbound to report the whereabouts of the Nighthawk when he saw him. As he was honour-bound to tell of Laughing Jack's treachery. Yes, Highness, we know of these things.'

Jimmy betrayed the guild to carry word to you first. There are certain matters that can be forgiven because of age, but these actions cannot.'

'I'll not stand by and allow Jimmy to be murdered.'

'Then listen, Prince of Krondor, for I have a story to tell. Once the Upright Man lay with a woman of the streets, as he had with hundreds of others, but this whore bore him a son. This is a certainty: Jimmy the Hand is the Upright Man's son, though he is ignorant of his paternity. This presents the Upright Man with something of a quandary. If he is to obey the laws he has made, he must order the death of his own son. But should he not he will lose credibility with those who serve him. An unpleasant choice. Already the Guild of Thieves is in turmoil from Jack's being shown as an agent of the Nighthawks. Trust is a thin enough commodity at most times, it is nearly nonexistent now. Can you think of another way?'

Arutha smiled, for he knew another way. 'In times not far past, it was not unheard of to buy pardon. Name your price.'

'For treason? No less than another ten thousand gold sovereigns.'

Arutha shook his head. His treasury would be gutted. Still, Jimmy must have known the risks of betraying the Mockers to bring him warning, and that was worth much. 'Done,' said Arutha sourly.

'Then you must keep the boy with you, Prince of Krondor, for he'll never be one with the Mockers again, though we will not attempt to harm him . . . unless he again transgresses against us. Then we shall deal with him as we would any freebooter. Harshly.'

Arutha rose. 'Is our business then done?'

'Except for one last thing.'

'Yes?'

'Also in times not far past, it was not unheard of to buy a patent of nobility for a price in gold. What price would you ask of a father to have his son named Squire of the Prince's court?'

Arutha laughed, suddenly understanding the course of negotiations. 'Twenty thousand golden sovereigns.'

'Done. The Upright Man is fond of Jimmy, though he has other bastards around, Jimmy is special. The Upright Man wishes Jimmy to remain ignorant of the relationship, but he will be pleased to think his son shall have a brighter future for this night's negotiations.'

'He will be placed within my service, without knowing who his father is. Shall we meet again?'

'I think not, Prince of Krondor. The Upright Man guards his identity jealously, and even to come close to one who speaks with his voice brings him dangers. But

we will carry clear messages to you when we know' where hide the Nighthawks. And we will welcome news of their obliteration. '

Jimmy sat nervously. For over three hours Arutha had been closeted with Gardan, Volney, and Laurie, as well as other members of his private staff. Jimmy had been invited to remain in a room set aside for his use. , The presence of two guards at the door and two more below the balcony outside his window gave ample support to the notion that he was, for whatever reason, a prisoner. Jimmy had little doubt he could leave undetected during the night if he had been in fit condition, but after the events of the last few days he felt abused. Also, he was at something of a loss to understand being returned to the palace with the Prince. The boy thief was uneasy. Something in his life had changed and he wasn't sure what, or why. The door to the room opened and a guard sergeant stuck his head in, waving to Jimmy to come. 'His Highness wants you, boy.' Jimmy quickly followed the soldier down the hall to the long passage to the council chambers. Arutha looked up from reading something. About the table sat Gardan, Laurie, and some other men Jimmy didn't know, while Earl Volney stood near the door. ~Jimmy, I have something for you here.' Jimmy simply looked around the room, not knowing what to say. Arutha said, "This is a royal patent naming You Squire to the Prince's court.") Jimmy was speechless, his eyes wide. Laurie chuckled at his reaction, while Gardan grinned. Finally Jimmy found his voice. "This is a jest, right?" When Arutha shook his head, the boy said, 'But . . . me, a squire?' Arutha replied, 'You have saved my life and you are to be rewarded.' Jimmy said, "But, Highness, I . . . thank you, but . . . there's the matter of my oath to the Mockers.' Arutha leaned forward. 'That matter has been disposed of, Squire. You are no longer a member of the Guild of Thieves. The Upright Man has agreed. It is done.' Jimmy felt trapped. He had never taken much pleasure in being a thief, but he had taken great pleasure in being a very good thief. What appealed to him was the chance to prove himself at every turn, to show all that Jimmy the Hand was the best thief in the guild . . . or at least would be someday. But now he was to be bound to the Prince's household, and with the office came duties. And if the Upright Man had agreed, Jimmy was forever denied access to the society of the streets. Seeing the boy's lack of enthusiasm, Laurie said, 'May I, Highness?' Arutha permitted, and the singer came over to place a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Jimmy, His Highness is



simply keeping your head above water, literally. He had to bargain for your life. If he had not, you'd be floating in the harbour this hour. The Upright Man knew you'd broken oath with the guild.'

Jimmy visibly sagged and Laurie squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. The boy had always thought himself somehow above the rules, free of the responsibilities that bound others. Jimmy had never known why he had been granted special consideration so many times, while others were forced to pay their way, but now he knew that he had stretched privilege too far once too often. There was no doubt in the boy's mind that the singer told the truth, and conflicting emotions . surged up within him as he considered how close to being murdered he had come. Laurie said, 'Palace life isn't so bad. The building's warm, your clothing'll be clean, and there's ample food. Besides, there'll be plenty to hold your interest.' He looked at Arutha and added dryly,) "Especially of late.' Jimmy nodded and Laurie led him around the table. Jimmy was instructed to kneel. The Earl quickly read the patent. 'To all within our demesne: whereas the youth Jimmy. an orphan of the city of Krondor, has rendered worthy service in preventing injury to the royal person of the Prince of Krondor, and: Whereas the youth Jimmy is considered to hold us forever in his debt, It is my wish that he be known to all in the realm as our beloved and loyal servant. and it is furthermore wished that he be given a place in the court of Krondor, with the rank of Squire, with all rights( and privileges pertaining thereunto. Furthermore let it be known that the title to the estate of Haverford on the River Welandel is conferred upon him and his progeny as long as they shall live, to have and to hold, with servants and properties thereupon. Title to this estate shall be held by the crown until the day of his majority. Set this day by my hand and seal, Arutha conDoin, Prince of Krondor; Knight-Marshal of the Western Realm and of the King's Armies of the West, Heir Apparent to the throne of Rillanon.' Volney looked at Jimmy. 'Do you accept this charge?' Jimmy said, 'Yes.' Volney rolled up the parchment and handed it to the boy. That, apparently, was all that was needed to turn a thief into a squire.

The boy didn't know where Haverford on the River Welandel was, but land meant income, and immediately he brightened. As he stepped away, he studied Arutha, who was obviously preoccupied. Chance had twice thrown them together, and twice Arutha had proved the only person who hadn't wanted anything from him. Even his few friends among the Mockers had tried to gain advantage over the boy at least once until he had shown that to be a difficult task. Jimmy found his relationship with

Arutha a novel one. As Arutha read some papers silently, Jimmy decided that if fate was again taking a hand, he'd just as soon stay with the Prince and his lively bunch as go anywhere else he could think of. Besides, he would have income and comfort as long as Arutha lived, though this, he thought sombrely, might prove a bit of a problem. While Jimmy glanced at his patent, Arutha in turn studied him. He was a street boy: tough, resilient, resourceful, and occasionally ruthless. Arutha smiled to himself. He'd get along just fine in court.

Jimmy rolled up the paper as Arutha said, 'Your former master works with alacrity.' To the entire group he said. 'Here I have his word that he has nearly uncovered the nest of the Nighthawks. He states he will send a message at any moment, and he regrets he must withhold any direct aid in stamping them out. Jimmy, what do you think of this?'

Jimmy grinned. 'The Upright Man knows how to play. Should you destroy the Nighthawks, business returns to normal. Should you fail, there is no suspicion he took a hand in your attempt. He cannot lose.' In more serious tones he added, 'He also worries about additional infiltration of the Mockers. Should that be the case, any Mocker participation places the raid in jeopardy.'

Arutha took the boy's meaning. 'It is come to that Serious a pass?'

'Most likely', Highness. There are no more than three or four men with access to the Upright Man himself. These are the only ones he can fully trust. I would guess he has a few agents of his own outside the guild, unknown to any but his most trusted aides, perhaps not even to them. He must be using these to ferret out the Nighthawks. There are over two hundred Mockers and twice that number of beggars and urchins, any of whom could be eyes and ears for the Guild of Death.'

Arutha smiled his crooked smile. Volney said, 'You have wits, Squire James. You should prove a boon to His Highness's court.'

Jimmy looked as if something tasted bad as he muttered, 'Squire James?'

Arutha seemed unaware of Jimmy's sour tone. 'We could all do with some rest. Until we hear from the Upright Man, the best we can do is recover from the rigours of the last few days.' He rose. 'I bid you all good night.'

Arutha quickly left the chamber and Volney gathered up the papers from the conference table and hurried along on his own errands. Laurie said to Jimmy, 'Well, I'd better take you in tow, youngster. Someone should teach you a thing or two about quality folk.'

Gardan came over to them. 'Then the boy is as good as

damned forever to be an embarrassment to the Prince.' Laurie sighed. 'it just shows you,)' he rejoined to Jimmy, 'you can put a badge of rank on the man, but once a barracks sweeper, always a barracks sweeper.' 'Barracks sweeper!' snapped Gardan, mock outrage on his dark face. "Singer, I'll have you know I come from a long line of heroes . . .'

Jimmy sighed in resignation as he followed the two bickering men from the hall. On the whole, life had been simpler a week ago. He tried to put on a brighter expression, but at best he resembled a cat who had fallen into a barrel of cream, unsure of whether to lap it up or swim for his life.

5

Obliteration

Arutha studied the old thief.

The Upright Man's messenger had waited while the Prince read the missive. Now the Prince's eyes were upon him. 'Know you the contents of this?'

'To the specifics, no. He who gave it to me was explicit in instructions.' the old thief, now robbed of his agility by age, rubbed absently at his bald pate as he stood before Arutha. 'He said to tell you the boy could bring you easily to the place named within, Your Highness. He also said to tell you that word has been passed regarding the boy, and the Mockers consider the matter at a close.' The man cast a brief glance at Jimmy and winked. Jimmy, who was standing off to one side, breathed a silent sigh

of relief at hearing that. The wink told him that while Jimmy would never be a Mocker again, he at least was not denied the streets of the city and that old Alvarny the Quick was still a friend. Arutha said, 'Tell your master I am pleased with this swift resolution. Tell him we shall have an end to this matter tonight. He will understand.' Arutha waved for a guard to escort Alvarny from the hall and turned to Gardan. 'Select a company of your most trusted men and any Pathfinders still in the garrison -Any who are new to our service shall be passed over. By word of mouth, tell each to muster at the postern gate beginning at sundown. By ones and twos I want them sent into the city, using varied routes and with sharp eyes for signs they are being followed. Let them wander and dine, as if they were off duty, though any drinking should be only sham. By midnight they are all to gather at the Rainbow Parrot.' Gardan saluted and left.

When Arutha and the boy were alone, the Prince said, 'You must think I've dealt harshly with you.'

Jimmy's face showed his surprise. 'No Highness. I thought it a bit strange, is all. If anything, I owe you my life . '

'I worried you'd resent being taken from the only family you knew.' Jimmy shrugged off the remark. 'And as for owing a life . . .' He leaned back, finger against his cheek as he smiled. 'We are even, Squire James, for had you not acted quickly the other night I'd be shorter by a head.'

They both smiled at that. Jimmy said, "If we're even, why the office?"

Arutha remembered his pledge to the Upright Man. 'Count it a means of keeping an eye upon you. You are free to come and go, as long as you discharge your duties as a squire, but should I find the gold cups missing from the pantry. I'll personally drag you down to the dungeon.' Jimmy again laughed, but Arutha's voice took on a more

sombre tone. 'Also, there's the matter of someone's foiling an assassin upon the roof of a certain fuller's house

earlier this week. And you've never said why you chose to come to me with news of that Nighthawk rather than report it as you were warranted to do.'

Jimmy looked at Arutha, his gaze older by years than his boyish face. Finally he said, 'The night you escaped from Krondor with the Princess, I got caught with a full company of Black Guy's horsemen on the docks between me and freedom. You threw me your sword before you knew you'd be safely away. And when we were closeted in the safe house, you taught me swordplay. You were always as fairly spoken to me as you were to any other. He paused for a moment. "You treated me like a friend i've . . . I've had few friends, Highness.'

Arutha indicated understanding. 'I also count few as true friends - 'my family, the magicians Pug and Kulgan, Father Tully, and Gardan.' His expression turned wry. 'Laurie has shown himself more than a simple courtier and I think he may prove a friend. I'll even go so far as to name that pirate Amos Trash a true friend. Now, if Amos can be the friend of the Prince of Krondor, why not Jimmy the Hand?' Jimmy grinned and there was a hint of moisture in his

eyes. 'Why not indeed?' He swallowed hard and raised his mask again. 'Whatever happened to Amos?' Arutha sat back. 'The last I saw of him, he was stealing the King's ship.' Jimmy guffawed. 'We've not had word of him since. I'd give much to have that cut-throat by my Side this night.' Jimmy lost his smile. 'I hate to bring this up, but what

if we run into another of those damn things that won't die?' 'Nathan thinks it unlikely. He thinks it happened only

because the priestess called that thing back. Besides, I can't wait upon the temples' pleasure to act. Only that death priest, Julian, has offered to help.'

'And we've seen how much help those who serve lims-Kragma can provide,' Jimmy added dryly. "Let's hope Father Nathan knows of what he speaks.'

Arutha rose. 'Come, let's get what rest we may, for the night should provide bloody work."

Throughout the night bands of soldiers, dressed in the common garb of mercenaries, had been wending their way through the streets of Krondor, passing one another without a flicker of acknowledgment, until at three hours after midnight over a hundred men were in the Rainbow Parrot. Several were dispensing uniform tabards from large sacks, so the soldiers would again be in the Prince's colours during the raid.

Jimmy entered in the company of two men dressed in simple foresters' garb, members of Arutha's elite company of army scouts, the Royal Pathfinders. The senior Pathfinder saluted. "This youngster has the eyes of a cat, Highness. He spotted our men being followed to the inn three times.'

When Arutha looked at them questioningly, Jimmy said. 'Two of them were beggars known to me, and they were easy to intercept and chase off, but the third . . . It may have been he simply followed to see if something was up. Anyway, when we blocked his way down a street subtly, you may be sure - he simply moved off in another direction. It could have been nothing.'

'it also could have been something,' Arutha said. "Still, there is nothing more we can do. Even if the Nighthawks know we are doing something, they will not know what. Look you here,' he said to Jimmy, pointing to a map on a table before him. 'This was given to me by the royal architect. It is old but he thinks it a fair accounting of

the sewers.'

Jimmy studied it for a moment. 'Perhaps a score of years ago it was.' He pointed to one spot on the map and another. "Here there's been a collapse of a wall, and while the sewage still flows, the passage is too narrow for a man. And here there is a new tunnel, dug by a tanner requiring a more rapid disposal of his waste.' Jimmy studied the map a bit longer, then said, 'is there a quill and ink, or charcoal?' A piece of charcoal was forthcoming and Jimmy made marks upon the map.

'Friend Lucas has a slip-me-out to the sewers in his basement.' Behind the bar the old owner's mouth dropped at

hearing that piece of news. 'What? How'd you know?' Jimmy grinned. 'The rooftops aren't the only Thieves Highway. From here' he pointed at the map - 'companies of men can move to these two points. The exits from the basement of the Nighthawks' stronghold are cleverly located. Each comes out in a tunnel not directly connected with the others. The doors may be only scant yards apart, but it's yards of solid walls of brick and stone, with miles of twisting sewers to travel, to gain one from the next. It would take an hour to find your way from one exit to another. It's this third one that's the problem. It empties out near a large landing with a dozen tunnels to flee down, too many to block.' Gardan, who was looking over the boy's shoulder,

said, 'Which means a coordinated assault. Jimmy, can you hear if someone is breaking in one of the doors and you're at the other?'

Jimmy said, 'I should think. If you slip someone to the top of the stairs, for certain. Especially this time of night. You'd be surprised how many little noises filter down the streets during the day, but at night . . .'

Arutha said to the two Pathfinders, 'Can you find these locations from this map?' Each nodded. 'Good. Each of you will guide a third of the men to one of these two entrances. The other third will come with Gardan and myself. Jimmy will guide us. You will position men but not enter the basement of that building unless you are discovered first or you hear our party assaulting those within. Then come with all speed. Gardan, those on the streets should be in position. They have their orders?' Gardan said, 'Each has been instructed. At first hint of trouble, no one is allowed to leave that building unless he wears your tabard and is known by sight. I have thirty archers in place on the rooftops on all sides to discourage any seeking quick exit. A herald with a trumpet will sound alarm and two companies of horsemen will exit the palace at the bugle. They will reach us within five minutes. Any in the streets not of our company will be ridden down, that is the order.'

Arutha quickly put on a tabard and tossed one each to Jimmy and Laurie. When all were wearing the Prince's purple and black, Arutha said, 'it is time.' The Pathfinders led the first two groups into the cellar below the inn. Then it was time for Jimmy to lead the Prince's group. He took them to the slip-me-out behind a false cask in the wall and led them down the narrow stairs to the sewers. The stench caused a few soldiers to gasp and utter soft oaths, but a single word from Gardan restored

order to the ranks. Several shuttered lanterns were lit. Jimmy motioned for a single line to be formed, and led the Prince's raiders off towards the Merchants' Quarter of the city.

After nearly a half hour walking, past slowly moving channels carrying waste and garbage towards the harbour, they found themselves approaching the large landing. Arutha ordered the lanterns shuttered. Jimmy went forward. Arutha tried to follow his movements but was astonished as the darkness seemed to swallow him up. Arutha strained to hear him, but Jimmy was noiseless. For the waiting soldiers, the strangest thing about the sewers was the stillness, broken only by the sound of slow water lapping. Each soldier had taken care to muffle all armour and weapons, so should there be a Nighthawk lookout he wouldn't be alerted. Jimmy returned after a moment and signalled that a

single guard stood at the bottom of the stairs to the building. With his mouth near Arutha's ear he whispered, 'You'll never get one of your men close enough before the guard gives alarm. I'm the only one who stands a chance. Just come running when you hear the scuffle begin.' Jimmy pulled his dirk out of his boot and slipped away.

Suddenly there was a painful grunt and Arutha and his men were off, all thoughts of silence discarded. The Prince was the first to reach the boy, who struggled with a powerful guard. The youth had come up behind the man and had leapt and grabbed him around the throat, but had only wounded him with the dirk, which now lay upon the stones. The man was nearly blue from being choked, but had tried to smash Jimmy against the wall. Arutha ended the struggle with a single thrust of his blade and the man slipped silently to the stones. Jimmy let go and smiled weakly. He had taken a terrible battering. Arutha whispered, 'Stay here,)' to him, then signalled his men to follow. Ignoring his promise to Volney to wait behind while

Gardan led the assault, Arutha silently hurried up the stairs. He halted before a wooden door with a single sliding latch, placed his ear next to it, and listened. Muffled voices from the other side caused him to raise his hand in warning. Gardan and the others slowed their approach. Arutha quietly moved the door's latch and pushed

gently. He peeked into a large, well-lit basement. Sitting around three tables were about a dozen armed men. Several were tending weapons and armour. The scene was more reminiscent of a soldiers' commons than a basement. What Arutha found more incredible was that

this basement was located below the most richly appointed and successful brothel in the city, the House of Willows, one frequented by most of the rich merchants and no small portion of the minor nobility of Krondor. Arutha could well understand how the Nighthawks could gain access to so much information about the palace and his own comings and goings. Many a courtier would boast of his knowledge of some "secret" or other to impress his whore. It would not have taken more than a chance mention from someone in the palace that Gardan had planned to ride out to the east gate to meet the Prince for the assassin to know Arutha's route that night earlier in the week.

Abruptly a figure entered Arutha's view that made the Prince catch his breath. A moredhel warrior approached a man who sat oiling a broadsword and spoke 'quietly to him. The man nodded while the Dark Brother continued his discourse. Then suddenly he spun. He pointed directly towards the door and opened his mouth to speak. Arutha didn't hesitate. He shouted, 'Now!' and charged into the

room.

The basement erupted into a riot of action. Those who had moments before been sitting idly by now grabbed up weapons and answered the assault. Others bolted out doors leading up to the brothel or down to other parts of the sewers. From above, screams and shouts told of customers alarmed by the fleeing assassins. Those who attempted to leave via the exits to the sewers were quickly pushed back up the stairs into the cellar by the other units of Arutha's invading force.

Arutha ducked a blow by the moredhel warrior and Rapt to the left as soldiers fought their way into the centre of the room, separating the Prince from the Dark Brother. The few assassins who stood their ground charged into Arutha's men with complete disregard for

their own lives, forcing the soldiers to kill them. The sole

exception was the moredhel, who seemed to be in a frenzy trying to reach Arutha. Arutha shouted, 'Take him alive!' The moredhel was soon the only Nighthawk standing

in the room, and he was forced back to the wall and held. Arutha came up to him. The dark elf locked gazes with the Prince, naked hatred upon his face. He allowed himself to be disarmed as Arutha put up his own sword. Arutha had never been this close to a living moredhel before. There was no doubt they were elver kin, though elves tended to be fairer of hair and eyes. As Martin had remarked more than once, the moredhel were a handsome



race, if one dark of soul. Then, as one soldier bent to examine the moredhel's boot top for weapons, the creature kneed the guard in the face, pushed away the other, and leapt at Arutha. Arutha had barely an instant to duck away from hands outstretched for his face. He moved to his left and saw the moredhel stiffen as Laurie's blade took him in the chest. The moredhel collapsed to the floor, but with a final spasm tried to reach out and claw at Arutha's leg. Laurie kicked the creature's hands, deflecting the weak clawing motion. 'Look well at the nails. I saw them gleam as he let himself be disarmed,' said the singer. Arutha grabbed a wrist and inspected the moredhel's

hand closely. 'Careful how you handle it,' warned Laurie. Arutha saw tiny needles embedded in the Dark Brother's nails, each with a dark stain at the end. Laurie said, 'it's an old whore's trick, though only those with some gold and a friendly surgeon can get it done. If a man tries to leave without paying or is given to beating his whores, a simple scratch and the man is no longer a problem.' Arutha looked at the singer. 'You have my debt.'

'Banath preserve us!'

Arutha and Gardan turned to see that Jimmy had crossed to a fallen man, fair and well dressed. He was staring at the dead assassin. 'Golden,' he said softly. 'You knew this man?' asked Arutha.

'He was a Mocker,' said Jimmy. 'in my life I would not have suspected him.'

'is there not a one left alive?' demanded the Prince. He was in a fury, for his orders had been to capture as many as possible.

Gardan, who had been taking reports from his men, said, 'Highness, there were full thirty and five assassins in this basement and the rooms above. All either fought so our men had no choice but to kill or turned and slew one another, then threw themselves upon their own weapons.' Gardan held out something to the Prince. 'They all wore these, Highness.' In his hand was an ebony hawk on a gold chain.

Then there was an abrupt silence, not as if the men had stopped their movements, but rather as if something had been heard and all had instantly halted to listen, yet there was no sound. An odd dampening of sound occurred, as if a heavy, oppressive presence had entered the room, and an eeriness descended upon Arutha and his men for a brief moment. Then a chill fell over the room. Arutha felt his neck hair rise, as some primordial dread filled him. Something alien had entered the room, an unseen but palpable evil. As Arutha turned to say something to Gardan and the others, a soldier shouted, 'Highness, I think this one is alive. He moved!' he

sounded eager to please his Prince. Then a second soldier said, 'This one, too!'

Arutha saw the two soldiers lean over the fallen assassins.

All in the basement gasped in horror as one of the corpses moved, his hand shooting upwards to seize the kneeling soldier by the throat. The corpse sat up, forcing the soldier upwards. The terrible wet cracking sound of the soldier's throat being crushed echoed in the room. The other corpse sprang upwards, sinking his teeth in the neck of the second guard, ripping open his throat while Arutha and his men were rooted in shocked silence. The first dead assassin tossed away the choking soldier and turned. Fixing milk-white eyes upon the Prince, the dead man smiled. As if from a great distance, a voice sounded from the grinning maw. 'Again we meet, Lord of the West. Now shall my servants have you, for you have not brought your meddling priests. Rise, rise, O my children Rise, and kill!' Around the room the corpses began to twitch and

move and. soldiers gasped and offered prayers to Tith, the soldiers' god. One, thinking quickly, hacked the head off the second corpse as it started to rise. The headless corpse shuddered and fell, but began to rise once more while the rolling head mouthed silent curses. Like grotesque marionettes manipulated by a demented puppeteer, the bodies rose, in jerks and spasms. Jimmy, his voice almost quavering, said, 'I think we should have waited on the temples' pleasure.'

Carden shouted, 'Protect the Prince!' and men leapt at the animated corpses. Like crazed butchers in a cattle pen, soldiers began madly chopping in all directions. Gore splattered the walls and all who stood in the room. but the bodies continued to rise.

Soldiers slipped in the blood and found themselves overwhelmed by cold, slimy hands that gripped arms and legs. Some managed throttled cries as dead fingers closed around their throats or teeth bit hard into their flesh.

Soldiers of the Prince of Krondor hacked and slashed sending limbs flying through the air, but the hands and arms only flopped madly about the floor like bleeding fishh out of water. Arutha felt a tugging at his leg and looked down to see a severed hand gripping at his ankle, A frantic kick sent the hand flying across the room to strike the opposite wall.

Arutha shouted, "Get out and hold closed those doors!" Soldiers swore as they cut and kicked their way through the blood and pulped flesh before them. Many of the soldiers, hardened veterans, were coming close to panic. Nothing in their experience had prepared them for the horror they faced in that basement. Each time a body

was knocked down, it would but try to rise once more. And each time a comrade fell, he stayed down. Arutha led the way towards the door leading upstairs, the closest exit. Jimmy and Laurie followed. Arutha paused to cut apart another rising corpse and Jimmy dashed past the Prince. Jimmy reached the door first and swore as he looked up. Stumbling down the stairs towards them came the corpse of a beautiful woman, wearing a diaphanous gown, torn half away, with a spreading bloodstain at the waist. Her blank white eyes fastened on Arutha at the bottom of the stairs and she shrieked in delight. Jimmy ducked under a clumsy slash and drove his shoulder into her bloody stomach, shouting, "Ware the stairs!" they both went down and he was first to his feet, scrambling Past her.

Arutha looked back into the basement and saw his men being pulled down. Gardan and several other soldiers had reached the safety of the far doors and were attempting to close them, while stragglers who were frantically attempting to reach them were being pulled down. A few valiant men were pushing closed the doors from inside, ignoring a sure sentence of death. The floor was a sea of gore. wet and treacherous, and many soldiers slipped and fell. never to rise again. Detached body parts seemed somehow to gather together and corpses would stand once more. Remembering the creature in the palace and how it had gained in strength as time passed, Arutha shouted, "Bar the doors!"

Laurie leapt up the

stairs 'and struck at the grinning

whore, once more on her feet. Her blonde head rolled past Arutha as he raced up the stairs after Jimmy and the singer. Reaching the ground floor of the House of Willows

Arutha and his companions were greeted with the sight of soldiers struggling with more animated corpses. The horse companies had arrived, cleared the streets, and entered the building. But they, like those below, were unprepared to fight dead opponents. Outside the main door several bodies, impaled with dozens of arrows, were trying to rise. Each time one would gain its feet, a flight of bowshafts would strike it from the dark, knocking it over again. Jimmy glanced around the room and made a leap atop

a table. With an acrobat's spring, he jumped high over a guard being strangled by a dead Nighthawk and grabbed at a wall covering. The tapestry held his weight for a moment, then the room filled with a loud tearing sound as it ripped free of its fastenings high overhead. Yards of

fine cloth fell about Jimmy, and he quickly disentangled himself. He grabbed up as much cloth as he could and dragged the tapestry to the large fireplace in the main room of the brothel. He dumped it in the fireplace and then started overturning anything that would burn onto it. Within minutes flames were spreading out into the room. Arutha shoved away a corpse and yanked down another

tapestry, which he tossed to Laurie. The singer ducked as a dead assassin lunged at him, and tangled the corpse in the fabric. Quickly spinning the dead creature, Laurie wrapped it in cloth and with a kick sent it stumbling towards Jimmy. Jimmy leapt aside and let the clothbound thing stumble into the rapidly spreading flames, tripping it as it went past. The dead man fell into the flames and began shrieking in rage.

The heat in the room was becoming unbearable, as was the choking smoke. Laurie ran to the door and halted just before the threshold. 'The Prince!' he shouted to the bowmen atop the surrounding buildings. "The Prince is coming through!"

"Hurry." came the answering shout as an arrow knocked down a rising corpse a few feet away from Laurie.

Arutha and Jimmy came out of the firelit door, followed by a few coughing soldiers. Arutha shouted, "To me!" At once a dozen guards were dashing across the street, past grooms brought along to hold the cavalry mounts. The stench of blood and burning bodies and the heat from the fire were causing the horses to nicker and tug at their reins as the grooms led them away.

When the guards reached Arutha, several picked up arrow-studded bodies and tossed them through the windows into the fire. The shrieks of the burning corpses ruled the night.

A dead Nighthawk stumbled out of the door, its left side ablaze, its arms outstretched as if to embrace Arutha. Two soldiers caught at it and hurled it back through the door into the fire, disregarding the burns they suffered as a consequence. Arutha moved from the door while soldiers denied exit to those corpses seeking to flee the inferno. He crossed the street as the most exclusive brothel in the city went up in flames. To a soldier he said, 'Send word to those in the sewers to make sure nothing gets out of the basement.' The soldier saluted and ran off.

In short order the house was a tower of fire, the surrounding area lit like day. Neighbouring buildings spilled their inhabitants into the street as the heat threatened to ignite the block. Arutha called for the soldiers to form bucket lines and douse buildings on both sides of the House of Willows.

Less than a half hour after the blaze began, there came

a loud crash and a billowing explosion of smoke as the main floor caved in and the building collapsed. Laurie

said, 'So much for those things in the basement.' Arutha's face was set in a grim expression as he said, 'Some good men remained down there.' Jimmy had stood transfixed by the sight, his face smudged with soot and blood. Arutha placed his hand upon the boy's shoulder. 'Again, you did well.' Jimmy could only nod. Laurie said, 'I need strong drink. Gods, I'll never get that stench out of my nose.' Arutha said, 'Let's return to the palace. This night's work is done.'

6

## Reception

Jimmy tugged at his collar.

Master of Ceremonies Brian deLacy struck the floor of the audience hall with his staff and the boy snapped eyes forward. Ranging from fourteen to eighteen years of age, the squires of Arutha's court were being instructed upon the duties they would be performing during the forthcoming celebration of Anita and Arutha's wedding. The old Master, a slow-speaking, impeccably attired man, said, 'Squire James, if you can't remain still, we shall have to find something of an active duty for you, say,) running messages between the . palace and the outer billets?' There was a barely audible groan, for the visiting nobles were forever sending inconsequential notes back and forth, and the outer billets, where many of them were to be housed, were as far away as three-quarters of a mile from the palace proper. Such duty was mainly nonstop running to and fro for ten hours a day. Master deLacy turned to the author of the groan and said, 'Squire Paul, perhaps you would care to join squire James?'

When no answer was forthcoming, he continued. 'Very well. Those of you who are expecting relatives to attend should know that all of you will be required to serve such duties in turn.' With that announcement, all the boys groaned. swore, and shuffled. Again the staff struck the wooden floor loudly.

"You're not dukes, earls, and barons

There will simply be too many in the palace for the servants, porters, and pages to meet every demand.' One or two days' duty will not cause your death.

Another of the new boys, Squire Locklear, the youngest son of the Baron of Land's End, said, 'Sir, which of

us will be at the wedding?'

'in time, boy, in time. All of you will be escorting guests to their places in the great hall and in the banquet hall. During the ceremony you'll all stand respectfully at the rear of the great hall, so you'll all get to see the wedding.'

A page ran into the room and handed the Master a note, then dashed off without awaiting a reply. Master deLacy read the note, then said, "I must make ready for the reception for the King. All of you know where you must be today. Meet here again once the King and His Highness are closeted in council this afternoon. And anyone who is late will have an extra day of running messages to the outer ,billets. That is all for now.' As he walked off, he could be heard to mutter, 'So much to do and so little time.'

The boys began to move off, but as Jimmy started to leave, a voice from behind shouted, 'Hey. new boy.' Jimmy turned, as did two others nearby, but the speaker ,had his eyes locked on Jimmy. Jimmy waited, knowing full well what was coming. His place in the oNer of squires was about to be established.

When Jimmy didn't move, Locklear, who had also halted, pointed to himself and took a hesitant step towards the speaker. The speaker, a tall, rawboned boy of sixteen or seventeen years, snapped, 'Not you, boy. I mean that fellow.' He pointed at Jimmy.

The speaker wore the same brown and green uniform of the house squires, but it was of better cut than those of most of the other boys, he obviously had the funds for personal tailoring. At his belt was a jewelled-hilt dagger, and his boots were so polished they shone like bright metal. His hair was straw-coloured and cut cleanly. Knowing the boy had to be the resident bully, Jimmy rolled his eyes heavenward and sighed. His uniform fit poorly and his boots hurt and his healing side itched constantly. He was in an ill-tempered mood to begin with. Best to get this over with quickly,

he thought. Jimmy walked slowly towards the older boy, who was called Jerome. He knew Jerome's father was the Squire of Ludland, a town up the coast from Krondor, a minor title, but one that garnered wealth for whoever held it.

When Jimmy stood before him, he said, 'Yes?'

With a sneer Jerome said, 'I don't like much about you, fellow.' Jimmy slowly smiled, then suddenly drove his fist into Jerome's stomach. The taller boy doubled over and collapsed onto the floor. He thrashed about for a moment before, with a grunt, he rose. 'Why . . .' he began, but stopped, confronted by the sight of Jimmy standing before him, a dagger in his hand. Jerome reached to his belt for his own dagger and felt nothing. He looked down, then

frantically about.

'I think this is what you are missing,' Jimmy said cheerfully, holding out the dagger to reveal the jewelled hilt. Jerome's eyes widened. Jimmy tossed the dagger with a flick of his wrist and the blade stood quivering in the floor between Jerome's boots. 'And the name isn't fellow'. It's Squire James, Prince Arutha's Squire.' Jimmy quickly exited the hall. After a few yards the boy called Locklear caught up and fell into step beside him. 'That was something, Squire James,' said the other new boy. 'Jerome's been making it hard on all the new boys . '

Jimmy stopped, in no mood for this. 'That's because you let him, boy.' Locklear stepped away and began to stammer an apologetic reply. Jimmy held up his hand. 'Wait a moment. I don't mean to be short with you. I have things on my mind. Look, Locklear, isn't it?' 'My friends call me locky.'

Jimmy studied the boy. He was a small lad, still looking more the baby he was than the man he would be. His eyes were wide and blue in a face of deep tan, his brown hair shot through with sun-gold. Jimmy knew that no more than a few weeks ago he was playing in the sand with the common boys at the beach near his father's rural castle. 'Locky,' said Jimmy, 'when that fool begins to trouble you, kick him where he lives. That'll sort him out quick enough. Look, I can't talk now. I've got to go and meet the King.' Jimmy walked quickly away, leaving an astonished boy standing in the hall.

Jimmy fidgeted, hating the too tight collar of his new tunic. One thing Jerome had been good for was to show him he didn't have to put up with poor tailoring. As soon as he could, he'd slip out of the palace for a few hours and visit the three caches he had around the city. He had enough gold secreted there to tailor himself a dozen new outfits. This business of being a noble had drawbacks he hadn't imagined.

"What's the matter with you, boy?"

Jimmy looked up and saw the narrow gaze of a tall old man with dark grey hair. He studied Jimmy with a practised eye, and Jimmy recognized him as Swordmaster Fannon, one of Arutha's old companions from Crydee. who had arrived by ship on the evening tide the night before. 'It's this deuced collar, Swordmaster. And these new boots hurt my feet as well.'

Fannon nodded. "Well, one must keep up appearances, discomfort or no. Now, here comes the Prince."

Arutha walked out of the great doors to the palace, to stand at the centre of the throng assembled to meet the King. Broad steps led down to the parade ground. Beyond

the ground, past the large iron gates, the great square of the city had been cleared of hawkers' stalls. Krondorian soldiers formed long lines along the route through the city to the palace, and behind them stood the citizens eager to catch a glimpse of their King. Lyam's column had been reported approaching the city only an hour before, but the citizens had been gathering since before dawn. Wild cheering heralded the King's approach and Lyam was the first to ride into view, sitting astride a large chestnut war-horse, Gardan, as city commander, riding at his side. Behind them rode Martin and the attending nobles from the Eastern Realm, a company of Lyam's Royal Household Guard, and two richly appointed carriages. Arutha's lancers followed, with the baggage train bringing up the rear.

As Lyam reined in his mount before the steps, trumpets sounded flourishes. Grooms rushed to take the King's horse while Arutha hurried down the steps to meet his brother. Tradition held the Prince of Krondor to be second only to the King in rank, and therefore the least deferential noble in the Kingdom, but all protocol was forgotten as the two brothers embraced in greeting. The first to dismount after Lyam was Martin, and in a moment all three stood reunited.

Jimmy watched as Lyam introduced his riding companions while the two carriages rolled up to the steps.

The doors to the first carriage opened and Jimmy craned his neck to see. A stunning young woman alighted and Jimmy gave a silent nod of approval. From the greeting she gave Arutha, Jimmy guessed her to be the Princess Carline. Jimmy stole a quick look to where Laurie stood and saw the singer waiting with open worship on his face. Jimmy nodded to himself: yes, that was Carline. Behind her came an old noble, who Jimmy expected would be Lord Caldric, Duke of Rillanon.

The second carriage's door opened and an older woman descended. Immediately after her came a familiar figure and Jimmy smiled. He felt a slight flush at sight of Princess Anita, for he had once harboured a terrible infatuation for her. The older woman would be Princess Alicia, her mother. While they were greeted by Arutha, Jimmy thought back to when Anita, Arutha, and he,) had 'all hidden together and the boy grinned unselfconsciously. 'What's gotten into you, Squire?'

Jimmy looked up at Swordmaster Fannon again. Covering his agitation, he said, 'nothing, sir.'

Fannon said, 'Well enough, boy, but you should learn to bear up under a little discomfort. I mean no disrespect to your teachers, but you're poorly prepared as squires go.'

Jimmy nodded, his eyes 'back on Anita. "New to the



trade, sir. Last month I was a thief.'

Fannon's mouth popped open. After a moment Jimmy took great delight in gently elbowing him in the ribs and saying, 'The King's coming.'

Fannon's gaze snapped forward, years of military training overcoming any other distractions. Lyam approached first, with Arutha at his side. Martin and Carline and the others followed as befitted their rank. Brian deLacy was presenting members of Arutha's court to the King, and Lyam ignored protocol several times to shake hands vigorously, even embrace several of the people waiting to be presented. Many of the western lords were men who had served with him under command of his father during the Riftwar, and he hadn't seen them since his coronation. Earl Volney seemed embarrassed when Lyam placed his hand upon his shoulder and said, 'Well done, Volney. You've kept the Western Realm in good order this last year.' These familiarities distressed several of the nobles, but the crowd loved them, cheering wildly each time Lyam acted like a man greeting old friends rather than the King. When the King came up to Fannon, he caught the old fighter by the shoulders as he began to bow. 'No,' said Lyam softly enough so that only Fannon, Jimmy, and Arutha could hear. 'Not from you, my old teacher.' Lyam engulfed the Swordmaster of Crydee in a bear hug and then with a laugh said, 'Well now, Master Fannon, how stands my home? How stands Crydee?'

'Well, Majesty', she stands well.' Jimmy noticed a faint moisture in the old man's eyes.

Then Arutha was saying, 'This young scoundrel is the newest member of my court, majesty. May I present Squire James of Krondor?' Master deLacy looked heavenward as Arutha usurped his office.

Jimmy bowed as he had been instructed. Lyam gifted the boy with a broad grin. 'You I've heard of, Jimmy the Hand,' he said as he took a step away. Then Lyam suddenly stopped. 'I'd best check to see I've all my belongings.' He made a show of patting himself down while Jimmy blushed furiously. Just as he was reaching the height of embarrassment, Jimmy saw Lyam cast a glance his way and wink at him. Jimmy laughed with the others. Then Jimmy turned and found himself looking into the bluest eyes he had ever seen as a soft, feminine voice said, 'Don't let Lyam upset you, Jimmy. He's always been a tease.' Jimmy began to stammer, being caught by surprise after the King's jest, then executed a ragged bow.

'Martin said, 'I'm glad to see you again, Jimmy,' and gripped his hand. 'We've often spoken of you and wondered if you were faring well.'

He presented the boy to his sister. Princess Carline

nodded to Jimmy and said, "My brothers and the Princess Anita have spoken well of you. I am pleased to finally meet you.' Then they moved off.

Jimmy stared after, overwhelmed at the remarks. "She's had that effect on me for a year,' came a voice from behind, and Jimmy turned to see Laurie hurrying to keep abreast of the royal party as it moved towards the palace entrance. The singer touched his forehead in salute to the boy as he hurried to the crowd, having mistaken Jimmy's astonishment at Carline's and Martin's remarks for his being thunderstruck by the Princess's beauty.

Jimmy returned his attention to the passing nobles and his face split into a broad grin. "Hello, Jimmy,' said Anita, now standing directly before him.

Jimmy bowed. "Hello, Princess.'

Anita returned Jimmy's smile and said, 'Mother, my lord Caldric, may I present an old friend, Jimmy.' She noted his tunic. 'Now a squire, I see.'

Jimmy bowed again before the Princess Alicia and the Duke of Rillanon. Anita's mother presented her hand and Jimmy awkwardly took it. 'I've wished to thank you young Jimmy, since I heard how you aided my daughter,' said Alicia.

Jimmy felt eyes upon him and blushed. He found within himself no hint of the bravado that had sheltered him for most of his short life. He could only stand awkwardly while Anita said, 'We shall visit later.' Anita, her mother, and Caldric moved forwards. Jimmy stood silently amazed.

No further introductions were made as the other nobles of the Kingdom passed on towards the great hall. After a short ceremony, Lyam was due to be shown to his private quarters. Suddenly the square erupted with the sound of drums and shouts as people pointed off to one of the major side streets to the palace. The royal party halted their entrance and waited, then Lyam and Arutha began walking back towards the top of the steps, the other nobles quickly scurrying around as all order to the procession crumbled. The King and Prince moved to where Jimmy and Fannon stood, and into their view rode a full dozen mounted warriors, each wearing a leopard skin over head and shoulders. Perspiration glinted on their dark skin as these fierce-looking men pounded upon drums mounted on either side of their saddles, while carefully guiding their mounts with their knees. Behind came another dozen leopard-skin-covered riders, each blowing on a large brass trumpet that curved over his shoulder. Both drummers and trumpeters moved their horses into two lines and allowed a procession of foot soldiers to come into view. Each soldier wore a metal helm ending in a spike, with a chain neck covering, and a metal cuirass. Ballooning

trousers were tucked into knee-high black boots and each carried a round shield with a metal boss and had a long scimitar in his belt sash. Someone behind Jimmy said, 'Dog soldiers.'

Jimmy said to Fannon, 'Why are they called that, Swordmaster?'

'Because in the ancient days in Kesh they were treated like dogs, penned away from the rest of the people until it was time to turn them loose on someone. Now it's said it's because they'll swarm over you like a pack of dogs if you give them the chance. They're a rough lot, boy, but we've taken their measure before.'

The dog soldiers marched into place and opened a passage for others to move through. They drew scimitars and saluted as the first figure came into view. He was on foot, a giant of a man, taller than the King and broader of shoulder. His ebony skin reflected the bright sunlight, for he wore only a metal-studded vest above the waist. Like the soldiers, he wore the odd trousers and boots, but at his belt he wore a flasher, a curved sword half again the size of a scimitar. His head was uncovered, and in place of a shield he carried an ornamental staff of office. Four men rode behind him, mounted on the small, fast horses of the desert men of the Jal-Pur. They wore the dress of desert men, not unseen but rare in Krondor flowing knee-length robes of indigo silk, open in front to reveal white tunics and trousers, the calf-high boots of horsemen, and head coverings of blue cloth wrapped in such a manner that only their eyes could be seen. Each wore a ceremonial dagger of considerable length in his waist sash, the handle and sheath exquisitely carved from ivory. As the large dark man climbed the steps, Jimmy could hear his deep voice: '. . . before him, and the mountains tremble. The very stars pause in their course and the sun begs his leave to rise. He is the might of the Empire and in his nostrils the four winds blow. He is the Dragon of the Valley of the Sun, the Eagle of the Peaks of Tranquillity, the Lion of the Jal-Pur . . .' The speaker approached where the King stood, with Jimmy behind, and moved off to one side as the four men dismounted and followed him up the steps. One walked before the others and was obviously the subject of the giant man's discourse.

Jimmy gave Fannon a questioning look and the Swordmaster said, 'Keshian court etiquette.'

Lyam had a sudden coughing fit and turned his head towards Jimmy behind his hand, and the boy could see the King was laughing at Fannon's remark. Regaining his composure, Lyam looked forwards while the Keshian Master of Ceremonies finished his introduction. '. . . He is an oasis to his people.' He faced the King and bowed

low. 'Your Royal Majesty, I have the signal honour to present his Excellency Abdur Rachman Memo HazaraKhan, Bey of the Benni-Sherin, Lord of the Jal-Pur, Prince of the Empire, Ambassador of Great Kesh to the kingdom of the Isles.'

The four dignitaries bowed in Keshian fashion, the three behind the Ambassador falling to their knees, briefly touching foreheads to the stone floor. The Ambassador placed his right hand over his heart and bowed from the waist, his left hand extended out and back. As all stood erect, they perfunctorily touched index finger to heart, lips, and forehead, a gesture indicating a generous heart, a truthful tongue, and a mind harbouring no deceit.

Lyam said, 'We welcome the Lord of the Jal-Pur to our court.'

The Ambassador removed his face covering, revealing a gaunt, bearded visage of advancing years, his mouth set in a half-smile. "Your Royal Majesty, Her Most Imperial Majesty, blessings upon her name, sends greetings to her brother, the Isles.' Dropping his voice to a whisper, he added. "I would have chosen to make a less formal entrance, Majesty, but . . .' He shrugged, with a faint toss of his head towards the Keshian Master of Ceremonies, indicating he had no control over such matters. 'The man's a tyrant.'

Lyam grinned. 'We return warm greetings to Great Kesh. May she always prosper and her bounty increase.'

The Ambassador inclined his head in thanks. 'If it pleases Your Majesty, may I present my companions?'

Lyam nodded slightly, and the Keshian indicated the leftmost man. "This worthy is my senior aide and adviser, Lord Kamal Mishwa Daoud-Khan, Shereef of the BenniTular. And these other are my sons, Shandon and Jezuz, Shereefs of the Benni-Sherin and also my personal bodyguards.'

'We are pleased you could join us, my lords,' said Lyam.

As Master deLacy attempted to restore some order to the milling nobles, another commotion broke out along a different street leading to the market square. The King and Prince turned away from the Master of Ceremonies and deLacy's hand went up. 'What now?' the old man said aloud, then quickly regained his nearly vanished poise.

A drumming more furious than the Keshians' could be heard as brightly coloured figures came into view. Prancing horses led a parade of soldiers in green. But each wore a shield of vivid hue upon his arm with strange blazons depicted. Loud pipes played a polytonal melody, alien but bright and infectious in rhythm. Soon many of

the citizens of Krondor had taken up the beat with hand clapping or impromptu dancing around the edge of the square.

The first rider came before the palace and his banner blew out in the wind. Arutha laughed and slapped Lyam upon the shoulder. "It's Vandros of Yabon, and Kasumi's Tsurani garrison from LaMut.' Then marching foot soldiers came into view, and they could be heard singing loudly.

When the Tsurani garrison of LaMut had come to stand before the Keshians, they halted. Martin observed, "LOOK at them, eyeing one another like tomcats. I warrant each side would love an excuse to test the other.' "Not in my city,' said Arutha, obviously not finding the notion amusing.

Lyam laughed. "Well, it would be a show. Ho! Vandros!"

The Duke of Yabon rode up and dismounted. He hurried up the stairs and bowed. 'I beg forgiveness for being tardy, Majesty. We were inconvenienced on the road. We chanced upon a band of goblins raiding south of ZUn.'

'How many in the band?' asked Lyam.

'No more than two hundred.'

Arutha said, ". 'Inconvenienced". he calls it. Vandros, you've been with the Tsurani too long.'

Lyam laughed. 'Where is the Earl Kasumi?'

'He comes now, Majesty.' Carriages could be seen entering the square as he spoke.

Arutha took aside the Duke of Yabon and said, "Tell your men to billet with the city garrison, Vandros. I want them close. When you have them bedded down, come to my quarters and bring along Brucal and Kasumi."

Vandros caught the serious tone and said, "As soon as the men are billeted, Highness.'

The carriages from Yabon were halted before the stairs and Lord Brucal, Duchess Felinah, Countess Megan, and their ladies-in-waiting got out. Earl Kasumi, formerly a Force Commander in the Tsurani army during the Rift war, dismounted his horse and walked quickly up the stairs. He bowed before Lyam and Arutha. Vandros quickly presented his party, and Lyam said, 'Unless that pirate the King of Queg is going to arrive in a war galley pulled by a thousand little sea horses, we shall retire.' With a laugh he swept past the near-distraught Master of Ceremonies deLacy, who was vainly trying to restore order in the King's procession.

Jimmy hung back, for while he had seen an occasional Keshian merchant, he'd never seen a dog soldier or a Tsurani. For all his worldly ways, outside the usual matters of the city and its life he was still a fourteen-year

old boy.

Kasumi's undercommander was giving orders for the billeting of his men, and the Keshian captain was doing the same. Jimmy sat quietly on the stairs, wiggling his toes to stretch his boots. He stared at the colourful Keshians for a few minutes, then watched the Tsurani as they mustered to depart the square. Both were certainly colourful', and if Jimmy-Could judge, both looked equally fierce.

.Jimmy was about to leave when something strange behind the Keshians caught his eye. He tried to decide what it was, but couldn't. Some odd itch made him walk down the stairs until he was near the Keshians, all still at parade rest. Then he saw what had caused him to feel something was out of the ordinary. Retreating into the crowd behind the Keshians was a man Jimmy had thought to be dead. Jimmy was rocked to the soul of his being, unable to move, for he had seen Laughing Jack vanish into the press.

Arutha paced. Around his council table sat Laurie, Brucal, Vandros, and Kasumi. Arutha had finished his recounting of the assault upon the Nighthawks. He held out a message. 'This is from Baron Highcastle, in response to my query. He says there is some unusual movement northwards in his area.' Arutha put down the paper. 'He goes on to give numbers of sightings, where, and the rest.'

'Highness,' said Vandros, "we had some movement in our region, but nothing of great note. In Yabon clever Dark Brothers and goblins can avoid the garrisons by turning westwards once they're past the northern limits of the elven forests. By skirting to the west of the Lake of the Sky they avoid our patrols. We send few companies into that sector. The elves and the dwarves at Stone Mountain keep that area quiet.'

"Or so we like to think,' snorted Brucal. The old former Duke of Yabon had resigned his office in favour of Vandros when the latter had married Brucal's daughter. But he was still a fine military mind and had been battling the moredhel all his life. 'No, if they move in small bands, the Brotherhood can come and go almost at will through the smaller passes. We've few enough men to keep the trading routes clear and a hell of a lot more ground to cover than that. All they must do is move at night and stay clear of the Hadati clan villages and the major roads. Let's not delude ourselves by thinking otherwise. '

Arutha smiled. 'That's why I wanted you here.'

Kasumi said, "Highness, perhaps it is' as Lord Brucal States. We've had little contact with them in recent times.

They may have tired of our steel and now move in small, stealthy bands.'

Laurie shrugged. Yabon-born and -raised, the singer from Tyr-Sog knew as much about the moredhel as any in the room. "It is something to consider; that we have all these strange reports of goings on to the north at a time when moredhel hands can be seen involved with the attempts to kill Arutha.'

"I would be less 'troubled,' said Arutha, "if I knew that crushing them in Krondor would prove sufficient. Until we've uncovered the mystery of who is behind all this, I think we are not through with the Nighthawks. They may take months to re-form and be a menace, but I think they'll return. And as I sit here, I am certain there's some connection between the Nighthawks and what is occurring in the north.'

A knock at the door preceded Gardan's entrance. "I have searched everywhere, Highness, and can find no sign of Squire James.'

Laurie said, 'Last I saw him, he was standing upon the steps next to Swordmaster Fannon while the Tsurani were making their entrance.

Gardan said, 'He was sitting on the steps after I dismissed the troops.'

From a high window a voice said, "He's now sitting above you.'

All eyes turned to see the boy sitting in a high-arched window overlooking Arutha's chamber. Before anyone could speak, he nimbly leapt down.

Arutha's expression showed mixed disbelief and amusement. "

When you asked to explore the roofs, I thought you would be needing ladders and . . . help . . . '

Jimmy's manner was serious. "I saw little sense in waiting, Highness, and besides, what sort of thief needs ladders or help to climb walls?' He came up to Arutha.

"This place is a warren of nooks and niches a man could secrete himself in.'

'But first he must get onto the grounds,' said Gardan.

Jimmy gave the captain a look indicating that that feat presented no difficulty. Gardan lapsed into silence.

Laurie picked up the dropped thread of conversation.

.Well, while we don't know what's behind the Nighthawks, at least they've been destroyed here in Krondor.'

"So I thought myself,' said Jimmy, looking about the room. 'But this afternoon, as the crowd began to break up, I saw an old friend in the square. Laughing Jack.'

Arutha looked hard at Jimmy. "It was my understanding you left that traitor to the Mockers dead.'

"As dead as any man with a six-inch hole in his chest from a steel bolt is likely to be. It's difficult getting out and about with half your lungs missing, but after what we

saw at the warehouse, if my own dear dead mum came to tuck me in bed tonight I wouldn't be surprised.' Jimmy spoke in a distracted fashion as he prowled ' around the room. With a slightly theatrical show he said, "Aha!" and pressed down on something behind a decorative shield on the wall. With a groan a section of 'wall, two feet wide and three high, swung open. Arutha went over to the opening and peered in.

"What is this?" he asked Jimmy.

"One of many secret passages throughout the palace. Back when we were hiding out together, Highness, I remember the Princess Anita talking of how she fled the palace with the aid of a serving girl. She once mentioned "taking a passage," and I'd thought nothing of it until today.'

Brucal looked about the room.. 'This may have been part of the original keep, or one of the first additions. Back home we had a bolt-hole out of the keep to the woods. I don't know of a keep that doesn't.' He looked thoughtful. "There may be more such passages.'

Jimmy smiled. 'A dozen or more. You walk around the roof a little' and you'll see some very wide walls and odd bends in passages.

Arutha said, "Gardan, I want every foot of these passages mapped. Take a dozen men and uncover where this one leads and where else it may empty. And see if the royal architect has a clue if any of these passages are shown in old plans.'

Gardan saluted and left. Vandros appeared deeply troubled. 'Arutha, in all this I have had little time to adjust to thoughts of assassins and Dark Brothers secretly working with them.'

"That's why I wanted this talk before the festivities get under way.' Arutha sat down. 'The palace is overrun with strangers. Every noble in attendance will have dozens of people in his retinue. Kasumi, I want your Tsurani in every key location. They would be impossible to infiltrate and are above reproach. Coordinate with Gardan, and if needs be we'll have only Tsurani, men I know from Crydee, and my personal guards'inside the central palace.'

To Jimmy he said, 'By rights I should have you strapped for this little escapade.' Jimmy stiffened until he saw Arutha smile. "But I warrant anyone who tried would end up with a dagger in the ribs to show for his efforts. I heard of your confrontation with Squire Jerome.'

'That snot thinks himself boss cocky of the yard.'

'Well, his father's very upset, and while he's not a very important member of my vassalage, he is certainly very loud. Look, you leave Jerome to play head rooster all he wants. From now on, you stay close to me. I'll tell Master deLacy you're relieved of further duty until I say



otherwise. But keep your prowling under control until you tell Gardan or myself you're going up on the roof. One of my more excitable guards might put an arrow into you before he recognized you. Things have been somewhat tense around here of late, in case you failed to notice.

Jimmy ignored the sarcasm. "The fellow would have to see me first, Highness.'

Brucal slapped the table. 'Got a tongue in his head, that one,' he said with a guffaw and approving nod.

Arutha smiled as well. He found it difficult to stay out of sorts with the young rogue. "Enough. We've receptions and banquets for the next week. Perhaps our concerns are for naught and the Nighthawks are no more.'

Laurie said, "Let us-hope.'

Without further discussion, Arutha and his guests dispersed to their own rooms.

"Jimmy.'

Jimmy turned and saw the Princess Anita coming down the corridor in his direction, accompanied by two of Gardan's guards and two ladies-in-waiting. When she caught up with him he bowed. She presented her hand and he kissed it lightly, as he had been shown by Laurie. 'What a young courtier you've become,' she observed as they resumed walking.

"It seems fate has taken an interest in me, Princess. I have never had ambitions above becoming a power in the Mockers, perhaps even the next Upright Man, but now I find my life has much broader horizons.'

She smiled while her ladies whispered behind their hands. Jimmy hadn't seen the Princess since her arrival the previous day, and again felt the faint tugging inside he had known the year before. He had put his boyhood infatuation behind, but he still liked her very much.

"Have you developed ambitions, then, Jimmy the Hand?'

In feigned scolding tones he said, 'Squire James of Krondor, Your Highness,' and they shared a laugh.

"Look, then, Princess: this is a time of change in the Kingdom. The long war with the Tsurani robbed us of quite a few men with titles. Earl Volney is acting the part of Chancellor, and there are no Dukes yet in Salador or Bas-Tyra. Three dukedoms without masters! It seems possible for a man of wit and talent to rise high in such an environment.'

'Have you a plan?' Anita asked, her delight at the boy's impudence showing in her bright green eyes and her smile.

'Not as yet, not fully at least, but I can see the possibility someday of a title beyond Squire. Perhaps,

even . . . Duke of Krondor.'

'First Adviser to the Prince of Krondor?' Anita said in mock astonishment.

Jimmy winked. "I am well connected. I am a close personal friend of his betrothed.' They both laughed. Anita touched his arm. "It will be good to have you here with us. I'm pleased Arutha found you so quickly. He didn't think it would be easy locating you.'

Jimmy faltered a half-step. It had never occurred to him that Arutha wouldn't tell Anita of the assassin, but now he realized he hadn't. Of course, Jimmy thought to himself, he wouldn't needlessly throw a pall over the wedding. Quickly he recovered his poise. 'It was more an accident than anything. His Highness never said anything about looking for me.'

'You'll not know how Arutha and I worried about you all the time after we left Krondor. Last we saw you, you were fleeing across the docks from Guy's men. We had no word of you. We passed through Krondor so quickly on our way to Lyam's coronation, we had no way to discover what had happened to you. Lyam sent warrants pardoning Trevor Hull and his men and giving them a commission for helping us, but no one knew what became of Jimmy. I made Arutha promise he would straight away begin inquiries. I didn't think he would make you a squire just yet, but I knew he had plans for you.'

Jimmy felt genuinely moved. This revelation added double meaning to Arutha's remark before that he liked to think they were already friends.

Anita halted their walk, indicating a door. "I am to stand for a fitting. My wedding gown arrived from Rillanon this morning.'

She leaned over and kissed him lightly upon the cheek. 'Now I must go.'

Jimmy fought down strange; and frighteningly strong emotions. "Highness . . . I am also glad to be here. We shall have a grand time.'

She laughed and passed through the door with her ladies, the guards taking up position outside. Jimmy waited until the door was closed, then walked away whistling a light tune. He reflected upon the last few weeks of his life and judged himself happy, despite assassins and tight boots.

Rounding a corner into a less frequented hallway, Jimmy halted. His dagger was instantly in his hand as he stood regarding a gleaming pair of eyes in the half shadows before him. Then with a scuffling sound the owner of those nearly glowing red eyes ambled out. covered in green scales, the creature bulked about the size of a small hound. His head resembled an alligator's,

with a rounded snout, and large wings were folded across his back. A long, sinuous neck allowed the creature to look backwards past an equally long tail as a young voice shouted from behind, 'Fantus!'

A small boy, no more than six years old, came dashing forward to throw his arms around the creature's neck. He looked up at Jimmy with serious dark eyes and said, "He won't hurt you, sir.

Jimmy suddenly felt awkward holding his dagger and quickly put it away. The creature was obviously a pet, albeit an unusual sort. 'What did you call it . . .?'

'Him? Fantus. He's my friend and he's very smart. He knows lots of things.'

"I guess he does,' agreed Jimmy, still uncomfortable under the creature's gaze. "What is he?"

The boy looked at Jimmy as if he were the living incarnation of ignorance, but said, "A fire Drake. We just got here, and he followed from home. He can fly, you know.' Jimmy only nodded. 'We' have to get back Momma will be angry if we're not in our room.' Pulling the creature around, the boy led him away without another word.

Jimmy didn't move for a full minute, then looked around as if seeking someone to validate the vision he had witnessed. Shrugging off his astonishment, the boy thief continued walking along. After a little while he could hear the sound of lute strings being plucked.

Jimmy left the hallway and entered a large garden, where Laurie was tuning his lute. The boy sat upon the edge of a planter, crossing his feet under him, and said, "For a minstrel, you're a sorry sight.'

'I'm a sorry sort of minstrel.' Laurie did look less than his usual spirited self. He fiddled with his lute strings and began a solemn tune.

After a few minutes Jimmy said, "Enough of this dirge, singer. This is supposed to be a time of cheer. What's made you so long in the face?"

Laurie sighed, his head cocked to one side. 'You're a bit young to understand - '

"Ha. try me,' interrupted Jimmy.

Laurie put up his lute. "It's the Princess Carline.'

'Still wants to marry you, huh?'

Laurie's jaw dropped. 'How . . . ?'

Jimmy laughed. 'You've been around nobles too long, singer. I'm new to all this. I still know how to talk to servants. More important, I know how to listen. Those maids from Rillanon were fit to bust to tell the maids here all about you and Princess Carline. You're quite an item.'

Laurie seemed unamused by Jimmy's mirth. "I suppose you've heard the whole tale?"

Jimmy took on an indifferent manner. "The Princess is . . . a prize, 'but I grew up in a whorehouse, so my views on women are less . . . idealized.' As he thought of Anita, his voice dropped a little. 'Still, I must admit princesses seem different from the rest.'

"Nice that you noticed,' Laurie commented dryly.

'Well, I'll say this: your Princess is the finest-looking woman I've seen and I've seen a lot of them, including your better-paid courtesans, and some of them are pretty special. Most men I know would sell their darling mothers to get her attention. So then, what's your problem?'

Laurie looked at the 'boy for a minute. "My problem is this business of being a noble.'

Jimmy laughed, a genuine sound of amusement. 'What problem? You just get to order people around and blame mistakes on someone else.'

Laurie laughed. "I doubt Arutha and Lyam would agree.'

'Well, kings and princes are a different sort, but most of the nobles around here show me nothing. Old Volney has some wits, but he's not too anxious to be here anyway. The rest just want to be important. Hell, musician, you should marry her. You might improve the breed.'

Laurie swung playfully at Jimmy, laughing as the brash youngster easily ducked away, also laughing. A third laugh caused Laurie to turn.

A short, slender, dark-haired man in fine clothing of simple cut stood observing the proceedings. "Pug! Laurie exclaimed, jumping up to embrace the man. "When did you arrive?'

'About two hours ago. I've had a brief meeting with Arutha and the King. They're off with Earl Volney now, discussing preparations for tonight's welcoming banquet. But Arutha hinted there was something strange going on and suggested I look for you.'

Laurie indicated Pug should take a seat, and he sat beside Jimmy. Laurie made the introduction, then said, 'I've much to tell, but first: how are Katala and the boy?'

'Fine. She's in our suite now, gossiping with Carline.'

Laurie again looked depressed at mention of the Princess. "William ran off somewhere after Fantus.'

'That thing is yours?' exclaimed Jimmy.

'Fantus?' Pug laughed. "You've seen him, then. No, Fantus belongs to no one. He comes and goes as he pleases, which is why he's here without anyone's leave.'

Laurie said, "I doubt he's on deLacy's guest list. Look, I'd best catch you up on matters of importance. ' Pug glanced at Jimmy, and Laurie said, "This fount of trouble here has been at the centre of things since the first. He'll hear nothing he doesn't already know.'

Laurie told of what happened, with Jimmy adding a

few bits of information the singer missed. When they were done, Pug said, "This business of necromancy is an evil thing. If nothing else you said speaks of dark powers at work, that does. This is more the province of priests than magicians, but Kulgan and I will aid in whatever way we can.'

"Then kulgan came from Stardock as well?'

'There would have been no stopping him. Arutha was his student, remember? Besides, though he'd never admit to it, I think he misses his arguments with Father Tully. And there was no doubt Tully would officiate at Arutha's wedding. I think that's where Kulgan is now, arguing with Tully.'

Laurie said, 'I've not seen Tully, but he was due to arrive this morning with those from Rillanon travelling at a more sedate pace than the King's party. At his age he tends to prefer things quiet.'

'He must be past eighty now.'

'Closer to ninety, but he hasn't lost a step. You should hear him around the palace in Rillanon. Let a squire or page fail at his lessons and he'll talk blisters on the boy's back.'

Pug laughed. then as an afterthought, he said, 'Laurie, how fare things with you and Carline?'

Laurie groaned and Jimmy hid a chuckle. 'That is what we were speaking of when you appeared. Good, bad, I don't know.'

Sympathy showed in Pug's dark eyes. "I know the feeling, friend. When we were children, back at Crydee Just remember, you were the one who held me to my' promise to introduce you if we ever returned to Midkemia from Kelewan.' He shook his head and with a laugh added, "It's good to know some things never change.'

Jimmy leapt off the bench. "Well, I must be off. Pleased to make your acquaintance, magician. Cheer up, singer. You'll either marry the Princess or you won't.' He dashed off, leaving Laurie struggling with the logic of that statement while Pug laughed aloud.

7

## Wedding

Jimmy prowled the great hall.

The Prince's throne room was being readied, and the other squires were supervising the activities of the pages and porters as all the last-minute touches were being applied. Everyone had their minds upon the ceremony, due to get under way in less than an hour's time. Jimmy found that the price of his being excused duty was having

nothing to do at the last, and as Arutha certainly didn't want him underfoot right now, he was left to find his own distraction. Jimmy couldn't shake the feeling that in the rush of excitement few were mindful of the past dangers to the Prince. The horrors found at the House of Willows had been hidden behind masses of bridal flowers and festive bunting. Jimmy noticed a black, sidelong glance from Squire Jerome and, irritated, took a menacing step in the older boy's direction. Jerome immediately had a need to be somewhere else and hurried off.

A laugh sounded from behind. Jimmy saw a grinning Squire Locklear carrying a huge bridal wreath past a Tsurani guard, who carefully checked it. Of all the other squires, only Locky showed Jimmy the slightest hint of friendship. The others were either indifferent or outright hostile. Jimmy liked the younger boy, though he tended to prattle on about the most insignificant things. He's the youngest child, thought Jimmy, his mother's darling. He'd last a fast five minutes on the streets. Still, he was a cut above the rest, whom Jimmy judged a boring lot. The only amusement Jimmy gained from them was their woeful imitations of worldly knowledge. No, Arutha and his friends were far more interesting folk than the squires with their lewd jokes and salacious speculations about this serving girl or that, and their little games of intrigue. Jimmy threw locky a wave and headed towards another door.

Jimmy waited to pass through the door as one of the porters came through. A small bunch of flowers fell from the man's load. Jimmy bent to pick it up. As he handed it to the porter, Jimmy was struck by a sudden realization. The blooms, white chrysanthemums, shone with a faint amber tint.

Jimmy looked back over his shoulder and upwards. A full four storeys above, the high vaulted ceiling of the chamber was punctuated by large stained-glass windows, the colours barely noticeable unless the sun was directly behind the panes. Jimmy studied the windows, as his "something is not as it should be" bump was itching. Then he understood. Each window was recessed into a cupola, no less than five or six feet deep, plenty of room to hide a quiet assassin. But how would someone get up there? The design of the hall was such that scaffolding would be needed to clean the windows, and the room had been almost constantly occupied for the last few days.

Jimmy quickly left the hall, walked down a connecting corridor, and went through into a terraced garden that ran the length of the Prince's great hall.

A pair of guards approached, walking post between the distant wall and the main palace complex, and Jimmy hailed them. "Pass the word. I'm going to snoop about a

bit on top of the great hall.'

They exchanged glances, but Captain Gardan had ordered that the strange squire wasn't to be detained should he be seen scampering about the rooftops. One Saluted. 'Right you are, Squire. We'll pass the word so the archers on the walls don't use you for target practice.'

Jimmy paced off alongside the wall of the Great Hall. The garden was off to the left of the hall as you entered the main doors, assuming you could see through the walls, Jimmy thought to himself. Now, if I were an assassin, where would I want to climb? Jimmy cast about quickly and spotted a trellis that ran up the connecting hall's outer wall. From there to the roof of the connecting hall would be no difficulty, then . . .'. Jimmy left off thinking and acted. He studied the configuration of the walls as he kicked off his hated dress boots. He scampered up the trellis and ran along the roof of the connecting hall. From there he leapt nimbly up to a low cornice that ran the length of the great hall. Moving with astonishing agility, he crawled along, his face pressed to the stones, towards the far end of the great hall. When he reached halfway to the corner, he looked up. One storey above awaited the bottoms of the windows, tantalizingly close. But Jimmy knew he needed a better climbing position and continued on until he reached the last third of the hall. Here, outside the portion of the hall given over to the Prince's dais, the building flared, giving Jimmy an extra two feet of wall at a right angle to the wall he hugged. Levering up in the angle was now possible. Jimmy felt about until his fingers discovered a crack between stones. He used his experience to good advantage, shifting his weight as his toes began searching for another hold. Slowly he inched upwards, seeming to climb in the angle of the two walls in defiance of gravity. It was a demanding task, requiring total concentration, but after what seemed an eternity he reached up and his fingers touched the ledge below the windows. Only a foot wide, the ledge was still a potentially fatal barrier, for any slip could send Jimmy falling to his death four storey's below. Jimmy reached up, took a firm grip on the ledge, and let go with his other hand. For an instant he dangled by one hand, then he reached upwards with the other and with a single smooth pull had a leg over the ledge. Standing upon the narrow ledge, Jimmy turned the corner above the rear of the dais, .faced the window, and peered through. He wiped away some dust and was momentarily blinded by the sun, seen through the window and another on the wall he had just left. He waited for his eyes to adjust again to the interior darkness as he shaded his eyes from the sun. This would prove difficult,

he thought, until the angle of the sun changed. Then Jimmy felt the glass move beneath his fingers, and suddenly powerful hands clamped around his mouth and throat.

Shocked by the sudden attack, Jimmy froze a moment and was too tightly held when he began to struggle. A heavy blow to the side of the head stunned him and the world seemed to spin.

When his vision finally cleared, Jimmy could see the snarling face of Laughing Jack before him. The false Mocker was not only alive, but in the palace and, from his expression and the crossbow nearby, ready and willing to kill. 'So, you little bastard,' he whispered as he adjusted a gag in Jimmy's mouth, 'you've turned up where you didn't belong one time too many. I'd gut you here, right now, but I can't risk anyone's noticing blood dripping below.' He moved around in the scant area between the glass and the open space above the hall that the cupola provided. 'But once the deed is done, over you go, boy.' He pointed to the hall floor. He tightened some cords around Jimmy's hands and ankles, pulling them painfully tight. Jimmy tried to make a sound, but it was lost in the hum of conversation among the guests below. Jack gave Jimmy another blow to the head, which sent the boy's senses reeling again. Jimmy saw Jack turn to survey the Hall below just before darkness overcame him.

Jimmy lay stunned for some unknown time, for when he recovered his wits, he could hear the chanting of the priests entering the hall. He knew the King and Arutha and the other members of the court would be entering immediately once Father Tully and the other priests were in position. Jimmy felt panic building inside. Since he'd been dismissed from duty, his absence would be overlooked in the excitement of the moment. Jimmy struggled, but Jack, being a mocker, knew how to make it difficult to slip those bonds. Given time and a willingness to lose some skin and blood, Jimmy would eventually rid himself of the ropes, but time was a precious commodity at present. With his struggling, he only managed to change his position so he was able to see the window. He noticed it had been tampered with to cause a single large panel of glass to swing aside. Someone had prepared this window days before. A change in the song below told Jimmy that Arutha and the others were in place and Anita was beginning her long walk down the aisle. The boy looked about frantically for a way either to break his bonds or to make enough noise to alert those below. The singing filled the hall with a chorus loud enough to cover a brawl, so Jimmy knew anything as feeble as kicking at the glass would only bring a blow to the head from Jack. Jimmy



could hear movement close by, during a lull in the singing, and knew Jack was placing a bolt in the crossbow.

The singing stopped, and Jimmy heard Tully's voice begin the instructions to the bride and groom. he saw Jack taking aim upon the dais. Jimmy was half folded in the narrow window space, forced back against the glass -by the kneeling Jack. Jack threw the boy a quick glance as he began to squirm. jimmy was unable even to kick out at Jack, who paused for a moment, evidently undecided whether to fire at his target or silence Jimmy first. For all the pomp, the ceremony itself was brief, so Jack seemed willing to chance he would be untroubled by the boy a few moments longer.

Jimmy was young, in fit condition, and an expert acrobat from his years of scampering about the roofs of Krondor. He acted without thought and simply flexed his entire body so it bowed upwards, head and feet against the sides of the cupola. he half rolled, half flipped himself, and suddenly he sat with his back to the window. Jack spun to look again at the boy and swore silently. He could not afford to lose this single shot. A quick glance downwards reassured him the boy had not alerted anyone. Jack raised his crossbow again and took aim.

Jimmy's vision seemed 'to contract, as if all he could see was Jack's finger on the trigger of the crossbow. He saw the finger begin to close and kicked out wildly. His bare feet glanced off the assassin and the crossbow fired. Jack turned in shock and Jimmy kicked out again with both feet. For a moment Jack looked to be calmly sitting at the edge of the window cupola. Then he began to fall outwards, his hands grasping wildly for the sill.

Jack's hands pressed out against the sides of the cupola ' and halted his fall. He hung in midair, not moving for an instant, then his palms began to slip on the stone. Jimmy rEcognized something else was strange, then realized the chanting, almost constant in counterpoint to the ceremony, had stopped. As Jack began his backward slide into space, Jimmy heard shouts and screams from below.

' Then Jimmy felt a shock and his head struck stone. His ,legs felt as if they were being torn from his hips, and the boy knew Jack had grabbed the only thing he could reach, Jimmy's ankles. Jimmy was dragged outwards as " . Jack's weight moved them both towards death. Jimmy

Struggled, pressing backwards with all his might, bowing his body to slow his slide, but he might as well have had snow heaped upon his feet for the good it did him. Bones and muscles protested, but he could not move an inch to rid himself of Jack. He was dragged outwards slowly, his legs, hips, and back scraping on the stone, the cloth of his trousers and tunic keeping skin intact. Then he was suddenly upright, as Jack's weight tipped his balance for

an instant, teetering upon the lip of the cupola. Then they fell. Jack released his hold upon the boy, but Jimmy didn't notice. The stones rushed up to meet them, to crush them in a hard embrace. Jimmy thought his mind must be going at the last, for the stones seemed to slow in their approach, as if some agency had ordered the boy's last seconds of life to be prolonged. Then Jimmy realized some force had control of him and was slowing his descent. With a less than gentle bump he was upon the floor of the great hall, stunned slightly, but decidedly alive. Guards and priests surrounded him and hands quickly lifted him as he wondered at this miracle. He saw the magician Pug moving his hands in incantation, and felt the strange slowness vanish. Guards cut his bonds, and Jimmy doubled in pain as the returning blood flow burned like hot irons in his feet and hands. He nearly fainted. Two soldiers seized his arms and kept him from falling. As his senses cleared, he saw a half-dozen or more holding Jack down, while others searched for the black poison ring or other means of suicide.

Jimmy looked about, his head clearing. All around him the room seemed frozen in horrified tableau. Father Tully stood at Arutha's side, while Tsurani guards surrounded the King, their eyes peering into every corner of the room. Everyone else looked at Anita, who was cradled in Arutha's arms as he knelt upon the stones. Her veils and gown were spread out around her and she seemed to sleep while he held her. She was a vision in pristine white in the late afternoon light, except for the rapidly expanding crimson stain upon her back.

Arutha sat in shock. He leant forward, elbows on knees, as his eyes stared out into space, unfocused, not seeing any of those with him in the antechamber. He saw only the last minutes of the ceremony, again and again in his mind's eye.

Anita had just pledged her vows, and Arutha was listening to Tully's final blessing. Suddenly she had a strange expression and seemed to stumble, as if shoved hard from behind. He caught her, finding it strange she should fall, for she was so graceful by nature. He tried to think of a witticism that would break the tension, for he knew she would feel embarrassed at stumbling. And she looked so serious, with her eyes wide and her mouth half open as if she wanted to ask some important question. When he heard the first scream, he looked up and saw the man hanging backwards out of the cupola high above the dais. Instantly everything seemed to run together. People were shouting and pointing and Pug was rushing forward, incanting a spell. And Anita couldn't seem to stand, no matter how he tried to help her. Then he saw

the blood.

Arutha buried his face in his hands and wept. In his life he had never before been unable to control his emotions. Carline placed her arms about him, holding him tight, and her tears fell with his. She had been with him since Lyam and three guards had pulled him from Anita's side, leaving the priests and surgeons to their work. Princess Alicia was in her quarters, near-prostrate from grief. Gardan was off with Martin, Kasumi, and ' Vandros, supervising the guards who were searching the grounds for any other intruders. By Lyam's order, the palace had been sealed within minutes of the assassination ' attempt. Now the King paced the room silently, while Volney was off in a corner, in quiet conversation with Laurie, Bruce, and Fannon. They all awaited word.

:-~". The door to the outer hall opened and a Tsurani guard announced Jimmy. He walked forward gingerly, for his legs had been strained and scraped badly. Lyam and the others watched as the boy thief came to stand before Arutha. Jimmy tried to speak, but no words were forthcoming. Like Arutha, he had relived every moment of the attack over and over in his mind while an acolyte of Nathan's order had bandaged his legs. His memory had constantly played tricks on him, as he would see Arutha's face of days ago when he had told Jimmy his feelings of friendship, then suddenly he would see the Prince's face as he had knelt holding Anita, uncomprehending shock on his features. Then Jimmy would remember Anita standing in the hall before going for a dress fitting. That image would fade and he would once more see Arutha slowly lower her to the floor as priests rushed to her side.

Jimmy again tried to speak as Arutha looked up. The Prince's eyes focused upon the boy, and he said, 'Why Jimmy, I . . . didn't see you there.'

"Jimmy saw the grief and pain in those dark brown eyes . . . and felt something break inside himself. Unbidden tears came to his eyes as the boy spoke softly.

'I . . . I tried

He swallowed hard, something seemed to be choking off his breath.

Jimmy's mouth worked, but no sound . . .

came. Finally he whispered, 'I'm sorry.' Then suddenly he was on his knees before Arutha. 'I'm sorry.'

Arutha looked on uncomprehendingly for a moment,

then shook his head. He put his hand upon Jimmy's

shoulder and said, 'it's all right. It wasn't your fault.'

Jimmy knelt with his head cradled in his arms upon Arutha's knees, sobbing loudly while Arutha awkwardly tried to comfort him. Laurie knelt beside him and said,

'You couldn't have done anything more.'

Jimmy raised his head and looked at Arutha. "But I should have." Carline leaned over and gently ran her hand down the

side of his face, wiping away the tears. 'You went to investigate, which no one else did. Who knows what would have happened if you hadn't.' She left unspoken the thought that Arutha might be lying dead had Jimmy not kicked at Laughing Jack when he fired.

Jimmy was disconsolate. He said, 'I should have done more.'

Lyam crossed to where Laurie, Carline, and Arutha were clustered around Jimmy. He also knelt beside the boy as Laurie made room. "Son, I've seen men who would fight goblins go pale at the thought of climbing out where you did. Each of us has fears,' he said softly. 'But when something terrible happens, each .of us always thinks, I should have done more.' He placed his hand over Arutha's, which still rested upon Jimmy's shoulder. 'I've just had to order the Tsurani guards responsible for searching the hall not to kill themselves. At least you don't have that twisted a sense of honour.'

Seriously Jimmy said, "If I could trade places with the Princess, I would.'

Lyam spoke solemnly. 'I know you would, son, I know you would.'

Arutha, as if slowly returning from some distant place said, 'Jimmy . . . just so you know . . . you did well Thank you.' He tried to smile.

Jimmy, with tears still on his cheeks, hugged Arutha's knees hard, then sat back, wiping at his face, returning Arutha's smile. 'I've not cried since the night I saw my mum murdered.' Carline's hand went to her mouth and her face turned white.

The door to the antechamber opened and Nathan came through. He wore only his white knee-length undertunic, having stripped off his ceremonial robes to supervise the care of the Princess. He was wiping his hands upon a cloth and he looked haggard. Arutha slowly rose, Lyam holding his arm. Nathan looked grim as he said, "She lives. Though the wound is severe, the bolt struck at a glancing angle that saved her spine. Had the bolt hit full on, death would have been instantaneous. She is young and healthy, but . . .'

'But what?' asked Lyam.

'The bolt was poisoned, Your Majesty. And it is a poison fashioned with foul arts, a concoction using evil spells. We have been able to do nothing to counter it. Alchemy or magic, nothing works.'

Arutha blinked. Comprehension seemed to elude him.

Nathan looked at Arutha, his eyes reflecting his sorrow "I'm sorry, Highness. She's dying.'

The dungeon lay beneath sea level, damp and dark, the

air musty with the sour smells of moulds and algae. A guard moved aside while another pulled open a protesting door as Lyam and Arutha passed through the portal. Martin waited off to one side in the torture chamber, speaking softly with Vandros and Kasumi. This room had not been used since before Prince Erland's time, except for a short period when Jocko Radburn's secret police had used it to interrogate prisoners during du Bas-Tyra's reign. The room had been cleared of the usual instruments of torture, but a brazier had been returned to its former place and irons were heating within. One of Gardan's soldiers tended the burning coals. Laughing Jack stood chained to a pillar of stone, his hands above his head. Standing in full circle around him were six Tsurani, close enough that the groaning prisoner touched them as he moved. Each faced outwards, maintaining a level of vigilance unmatched by even the most loyal of Arutha's Household Guard. From another part of the chamber, Father Tully left the side of several other priests, all of whom had been present at the wedding. He said to Lyam, 'We have established protective spells of the most powerful sort.' He pointed at Jack. 'But something seeks to gain access to him. How fares Anita?'

Lyam shook his head slowly. 'The bolt was poisoned in some arcane fashion. Nathan says her time grows short.' 'Then we must question the prisoner quickly,' said the old priest. 'We have no idea what we are combatting.' Jack groaned aloud. Arutha's rage rose up and he nearly choked with fury. Lyam pushed past his brother, motioned for a guard to step aside, and looked the thief in the eyes. Laughing Jack looked back with eyes wide with fear. His body gleamed and sweat dripped off his hooked nose. Each time he moved, he groaned. The Tsurani had obviously not been gentle when they searched him. Jack tried to speak, wetted his lips with his tongue, then said, 'Please . . .' His voice was hoarse. 'Don't let him take me.'

Lyam stepped up beside him and grabbed Jack, his hand closing on the man's face like a vice. Shaking Jack's head, he said, 'What poison did you use?'

Jack was near tears when he spoke. 'I don't know. I SWeat it!'

'We shall have the truth out of you, man. You had better answer, for we can make it hard on you.' Lyam indicated the burning irons.

Jack tried to laugh, but it became a bubbling sound. 'Hard? You think I fear irons? Listen you, King of the bloody damn Kingdom, I'll gladly let you burn out my liver if you promise you won't let him take me.' The last statement had a hysterical note in it.

Lyam threw a quick glance around the room. "Let who

take 'him?'

Tully said, "He's been yelling for an hour not to let 'him' take him." The priest's expression betrayed a thought. "He's made a compact with dark powers. Now he fears to pay." he said with sudden certainty.

Jack nodded his head emphatically, eyes wide. With a rough, half-sob, he said, 'Aye, priest, as would you if you'd ever been touched by that darkness.'

Lyam grabbed Jack by his stringy hair and jerked his head back. 'What are you speaking of?'

Jack's eyes grew round. 'Murmandamus,' he whispered.

Suddenly there was a cold chill in the room and the coals in the brazier and the torches on the wall seemed to flicker and fade. 'He's here!' shrieked Jack, out of control. One of the priests began to chant and after a moment the light brightened.

Tully looked towards Lyam. 'That was . . . frightening.' His face was drawn and his eyes wide. 'It has tremendous power. Hurry, Majesty, but speak not that name. It only serves to draw it to its minion here.'

"What was the poison?" Lyam demanded.

Jack sobbed, "I don't know. In truth. It was something the goblin kisser gave me, the Dark Brother. I swear it."

The door opened and Pug entered, followed by the stout figure of another magician, this one wearing a bushy grey beard. Pug's dark eyes mirrored the sombre tone of his voice when he said, 'Kulgan and I have established wards around this part of the palace, but something batters them even as we speak.'

Kulgan, his face wan as if he had just finished some taxing labour, added, "Whatever is seeking to enter is determined. Given time, I think we could unravel something of its nature, but . . ."

Tully finished the thought. . . . it will win past us before we can. So time is something we lack.' To Lyam he said, 'Hurry.'

Lyam said, 'This thing you serve, or this person, whatever it is, tell us what you know. Why does it seek my brother's death?'

'A bargain!' shouted Jack. "I'll tell you what I know everything, just don't let him take me.'

Lyam nodded curtly. 'We shall keep him from you.'

'You don't know,' Jack screamed, then his voice fell off to a half-sob. 'I was dead. Do you understand? That bastard shot me instead of Jimmy and I was dead.' He looked at those around the room. "None of you can know. I could feel life slip away, and then he came. When I was almost dead, he took me to this cold, dark place and he . . . hurt me. He showed me . . . things' . He said I could live and serve him and he'd give me back

life, or he'd . . . he'd let me die and leave me there. He couldn't save me then, for I wasn't his. But now I am. He's . . . evil.'

Julian, the priest of Ilim-Kragma, came up behind the King. 'He lied to you, man. That cold place was of his fashioning. Our mistress's love brings comfort to all who embrace her at the end. You were shown a lie.'

'He's the father of all liars! But now I'm his creature,' Jack sobbed. 'He said I had to go to the palace and kill the Prince. He said I was the only one he had left and the others would arrive too late, wouldn't be here for days. It had to be me. I said I would, but . . . I botched it and now he wants my soul!' the last was a Piteous cry, a Plea for mercy beyond the power of the King to grant.

Lyam turned to Julian. "Can we do anything?"

Julian said, "There is a rite, but . . ." He looked at Jack and said, "You will die, man, you know that. You died already and you are here because of an unholy compact. What will be will be. You will die within the hour. Do you understand?"

Through tears and spittle Jack sobbed, 'Yes.'

'Then you will answer our questions and tell us what you know, and die willingly to free your soul?' Jack's eyes screwed shut and he cried like a child, but he nodded his head.

'So tell us what you know of the Nighthawks and this plot to kill my brother,' demanded Lyam.

Jack sniffed and gasped for air.

'SiX, SeVen mOnthS ago, Golden Base tells me he's tumbled to something that could make us wealthy.' As he spoke, Jack's voice lost the hysterical quality. 'I asked him if he'd cleared it with the Nightmaster, but he says it's not Mocker business. I'm not sure it's a good idea playing fast and loose with the guild, but I'd not mind an extra sovereign on the side, so I say "Why not?" and I go with him. We met this fellow Havram, who'd worked with us before, and who asks a bunch of questions but isn't giving with answers, so I get ready to chuck' the whole deal, before I even know what's going on, but then he lays this bag of gold on the table and tells me there's more to be had.'

Jack closed his eyes and a half-choked sob came from his throat. 'I came with Golden and Havram to the Willows, through the sewer. I nearly messed myself when I saw the goblin kisser's, two of them, in the cellar. They had gold, though, and I will put up with a lot for gold. So they tell me I've got to do this and that and listen up to what's coming along from the Upright Man and Nightmaster and Daymaster and tell them. I tell them that's a death warrant, then they pull out their swords and tell me it's a death warrant if I don't. I thought I'd go along, then turn my bashers loose on them, but they took me up

to another room in the Willows, and this fellow, all in robes, was there. I couldn't see his face but he sounded funny, and he stank. I smelled that stink once when I was a kid, and I'll never forget it.'

"What?" said Lyam.

'in a cave once I smelled it. Snake.'

Lyam turned to Tully, who gasped. 'A Pantathian serpent priest!' The other priests in the room looked aghast and began speaking quietly with one another.

Tully said, 'Continue, time grows short.'

'Then they start doing things like I never seen before . I'm no misty-eyed virgin, thinking the world's pure and lovely, but these blokes were something I've never dreamt of. They brought in a kid! A little girl, no more than eight or nine. I thought I'd seen it all. The one in the robes pulls a dagger and . . .' Jack gulped, obviously fighting down the contents of his stomach. 'They drew these diagrams with her blood and took some sort of oath. I'm not one for the gods, but I've always tossed a coin to Ruthia and Banath on the high holidays. But now I'm praying to Banath like I'm robbing the city treasury in broad daylight. I don't know if that had anything to do with it, but they didn't make me take the oath . . .' His voice broke into a sob. "Man, they were drinking her blood!" he took a deep breath. "I agreed to work with them. Everything went all right until they told me to ambush Jimmy.'

'Who are these men and what do they want?' demanded Lyam.

'This goblin kisser tells me one night that there's some sort of prophecy about the Lord of the West. The Lord of the West must die, then something's going to happen.'

Lyam shot a glance at Arutha. "You said they called you Lord of the West.'

Arutha had regained some measure of self-control and said, 'Yes, they have, twice.'

Lyam returned to the questioning. 'What else?'

'I don't know,' said Jack, nearly exhausted. "They would talk. among themselves. I wasn't properly one of them.' Again the room shuddered and the coals and torches flickered. 'He's here!' Jack shrieked.

, Arutha came to stand at Lyam's shoulder.

'What about the poison?' he demanded.

"I don't know,' Jack sobbed.

'it was something the goblin kisser gave me. It' - he nodded - "one of them called it "Silverthorn".'

Arutha looked rapidly around the room but could see no one who recognized that name.

Suddenly one of the priests said, 'it has returned.'

Several of the priests began incantations then stopped,



and one said, "it has won past our wards.

Lyam said to Tully, "Are we in danger?"

Tully replied, "The dark powers may directly control only those who have willingly given themselves over to them. We are safe from direct attack here."

The room began to chill as the torches flickered madly, and shadows deepened on all sides. "Don't let him take me!" Jack shrieked. "You promised!"

Tully looked to Lyam, who nodded and indicated that Father Julian should take charge.

The King motioned for the Tsurani guards to give the priest of lims-Kragma room. The priest stood before Jack and asked, "Do you find in your heart the earnest desire to receive our mistress's mercy?"

Jack couldn't speak for terror. Through tear-filled eyes he blinked, then nodded. Julian began a low, quiet chant and the other priests made quick gestures. Tully came over to Arutha and said, "Stay calm. Death is now among us."

It was over quickly. One moment Jack was sobbing uncontrollably, then abruptly he slumped down, prevented from falling only by the chains. Julian turned to the others. "He is safe with the Mistress of Death. No harm can come to him now."

Suddenly the very walls of the chamber seemed to shake. A black presence could be felt in the room and a high-pitched keening began, as something inhuman shrieked in outrage at being robbed of its minion. All the priests, as well as Pug and Kulgan, mounted a magic defence against the invading spirit, then suddenly everything was deathly quiet.

Tully, looking shaken, said, "it has fled."

Arutha knelt beside the bed, his face a stony mask. Anita lay with her hair falling upon the white pillow like a dark red crown. "She seems so tiny," he said softly. He looked at those in the room. Carline clung to Laurie's arm, while Martin waited with Pug and Kulgan next to the window. In silence Arutha's eyes beseeched them all. All looked down on the princess, except Kulgan, who seemed lost in thoughts of his own. They stood the deathwatch, for Nathan had said the young Princess wouldn't last the hour. Lyam was in another room attempting to comfort Anita's mother.

Suddenly Kulgan moved around the bed and, in a voice made loud by the hushed tones of the others, asked Tully, "if you had a question and you could ask it only once, where would you go to ask it?"

Tully blinked. "Riddles?" Kulgan's expression, his bushy grey eyebrows meeting over his prominent nose, showed he was not attempting some tasteless jest. "I'm sorry,

said Tully. "Let me think . . ." Tully's aged face furrowed in concentration. Then he looked as if some obvious truth had struck. "Sarth!"

Kulgan tapped the old cleric in the chest with a forefinger. 'Right. Sarth.'

Arutha, who had been following the conversation, said, "Why Sarth? It is one of the least important ports in the Principality."

'Because,' answered Tully, 'there is an Ishapian abbey near there that is said to house more knowledge than any other place in the Kingdom.'

'And,' added Kulgan, 'if there was any place in this Kingdom where we could discover the nature of Silverthorn, and what would counter it, that would be the place.'

Arutha looked helplessly down at Anita. 'But Sarth No rider could reach there and return in less than a week and . . .'

Pug stepped forward. "I may be able to help."

With sudden authority he said, 'Leave the room. All of you, except Fathers Nathan, Tully, and Julian.' He said to Laurie, 'Run to my rooms. Katala will give you a large red-leather-bound book. Bring it at once.'

Without question Laurie dashed off, while the others vacated the room. Pug spoke softly to the priests. "Can you slow her passage through time without harm?"

Nathan said, "I can work such a spell. I did so with the wounded Dark Brother before he died. But it will gain us only a few hours.' He looked down at Anita, whose face had already taken on a cold blue appearance. Nathan touched her forehead. "She grows clammy to the touch She fails fast. We must hurry.'

The three priests quickly fashioned the pentagram and lit the candles. Within minutes they had prepared the room and soon the rite was done. The Princess lay, apparently asleep, in a bed engulfed by a rosy glow seen when viewed askance. Pug led the priests from the room and asked for sealing wax to be brought. Martin ordered it and a page ran off. Pug took the book he had asked Laurie to fetch. He re-entered the room and paced around it, reading from his tome. When he was finished, he stepped outside and began a long string of incantations. He finished by placing a seal of wax upon the wall near the door. He then closed the book. it is done.'

Tully moved towards the door, and Pug's hand restrained him. "Do not cross the threshold.' The old priest looked at Pug questioningly.

Kulgan shook his head in appreciation. "Don't you see what the boy's done, Tully?" Pug was forced to smile, for even after he'd grown long white whiskers, he'd still be a boy to Kulgan. 'Look at the candles!'

The others looked in, and in a moment all could see

what the stout magician meant. The candles at the corners of the pentagram were alight, although this was difficult to see in the daylight. But when they were watched closely, it was clear the flames didn't flicker. Pug said to the others, "Time moves so slowly in that room it is nearly impossible to detect its passage. The wall of this palace would crumble to dust before the candles burn a tenth part of their length. Should anyone cross the threshold, he will be caught like a fly in amber. It would mean death, but Father Nathan's spell slows time's ravages within the pentagram and prevents harm to the Princess.' 'How long will it last?' said Kulgan, obviously in awe of his former student.

'Until the seal is broken.'

Arutha's face betrayed the first flickerings of hope.

"She will live?"

"She lives now,' said Pug. "Arutha, she exists between moments, and will stay that way, forever young, until the spell is removed. But then time will once again flow for her and she will need a cure, if one exists.'

Kulgan gave out with an audible sigh. 'Then we have gained that which we needed most. Time.'

"Yes, but how much?' asked Tully.

Arutha's voice was firm. 'Enough. I shall find a cure.'

Martin said, "What do you intend?"

Arutha looked at his brother, and for the first time that day was free of the crippling grief, the madness of despair. Coldly, evenly he said, "i will go to Sarth.'

8

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Lyam sat unmoving. He studied Arutha for a long moment and shook his head. "No. I forbid it.' Arutha registered no reaction as he said, 'Why?'

Lyam sighed. 'Because it's too dangerous, and you've other responsibilities here.' Lyam rose from behind the table in Arutha's private quarters and crossed over to his brother. Gently placing his hand on Arutha's arm, he said, 'i know your nature, Arutha. You hate sitting idly by while matters are moving to conclusion without you. I know you cannot abide the thought of Anita's fate resting in hands other than your own, but in good conscience I cannot allow you to travel to Sarth.'

Arutha's expression remained clouded, as it had been since the assassination attempt the day before. But with the death of Laughing Jack, Arutha's rage had fled, seeming to turn inwards, becoming cold detachment. Kulgan and Tully's revelation of a possible source of knowledge existing in Sarth had cleansed his mind of the

initial madness. Now he had something to do, something that required clarity of judgement, the ability to think rationally, coolly, dispassionately. Fixing his brother with a penetrating look, he said, 'I've been away for months, travelling abroad with you, so the business of the Western Realm can endure my absence for another few weeks. As for my safety,' he added, his voice rising in inflection, 'we've all seen just how safe I am in my own palace.' He fell into silence for a moment, then said, 'I will go to Sarth.' Martin had been quietly sitting in the corner, observing the debate, listening closely to both his half brothers. He leaned forward in his chair. 'Arutha', I've known you'

since you were a babe and I know your moods as well as my own. You think it impossible to leave vital matters to the care of others. You have a certain arrogance to your nature, little brother. It is a trait, a flaw of character if you will, we all share.'

Lyam blinked as if surprised to be included in the indictment. "All . . .?"

The corner of Arutha's mouth turned up in a half-smile as he let out a deep sigh. 'All, Lyam,' Martin said. "We're all three Boric's sons, and for his good qualities, Father could be arrogant. Arutha, in temper you and I are as one, I simply mask myself better. I can think of little to make me chafe more than sitting while others are about tasks I feel better able to accomplish, but at the last, there is no reason for you to go. There are others better suited. Tully, Kulgan, and Pug can set pen to parchment with all the questions required for the Abbot at Sarth. And there are those better suited to carry such messages quickly and without notice through the woods between here and Sarth.'

Lyam scowled. "Such as a certain duke from the West

I expect.'

Martin smiled his crooked smile, a reflection of Arutha's. 'Not even Arutha's Pathfinders are as adept at travelling through the woods as one elver-taught. If this Murmandamus has agents along the woodland trails, there is no one south of Elvandar more likely to win past them than I.'

Lyam cast his eyes heavenward in disgust. 'You are no better than he.' He crossed to the doors and pulled them open. Arutha and Martin followed behind. Gardan waited without, and his company of guards snapped to attention as their monarch left the chamber. To Gardan, Lyam said, "Captain, should either of our half-witted brothers attempt to leave the palace, arrest him and lock him up.

That is our royal will. Understood?'  
Gardan saluted. 'Yes, Your Majesty.'  
Without another word, Lyam strode down the hall

towards his own quarters, his face a mask of worry and preoccupation. Behind him Gardan's guards exchanged astonished glances, then watched Arutha and Martin leave in another direction. Arutha's face was flushed, his anger only partially hidden, while Martin's expression revealed nothing of his feelings. When the two brothers were out of sight, questioning glances passed from soldier to soldier, for they had heard every word exchanged between the King and his brothers, until Gardan spoke in soft but commanding tones. 'Steady on. You're at post.'

'Arutha!' Arutha and Martin, who had been speaking softly as they walked, halted as the Keshian Ambassador hurried to overtake them, his retinue following behind. He reached them, bowed slightly, and said, 'Your Highness, Your Grace.'

'Good day, Your Excellency,' Arutha responded somewhat curtly. The presence of Lord Hazara-Khan reminded him there were obligations of office going unmet. Sooner or later, Arutha knew, he would have to return his attention to the mundane concerns of governance. That thought rankled him.

The Ambassador said, 'I have been informed, Your Highness, that I and my party will require permission to quit the palace. Is this so?'

Arutha's irritation intensified, though now it was directed at himself. He had secured the palace as a matter of course, but had done so without considering the often sticky question of diplomatic immunity, that necessary oil in the usually squeaky machinery of international relations. With a note of apology he said, 'My lord Hazara-Khan, I am sorry. In the heat of the moment "I fully understand, Highness.' Looking quickly about, he said, 'May I also have a brief moment? We could speak as we walk.' Arutha indicated he might, and Martin dropped back to walk with Hazara-Khan's sons and bodyguard. The Ambassador said, 'It would be a poor time to pester the King over treaties. I think it a proper time to visit my people in the , Jal-Pur. I will stay there awhile. I'll return to your city, or to Rillanon, as needed, to discuss 'treaties, after . . . things have settled.'

Arutha studied the Ambassador. Volney's intelligence on him had revealed that the Empress had dispatched one of her finest minds to negotiate with the Kingdom.

'My lord Hazara-Khan, I thank you for considering my own feelings and those of my family at this time.'

The Ambassador waved away the remark. "There is no

honour in -besting those afflicted by sorrow and woe. When this evil business is over, I desire you and your brother to come to the negotiating table with clear minds, when we discuss the Vale of Dreams. I wish to win concessions from the best you have to offer, Highness. Now it would be too simple to gain advantage. You need Kesh's approbation in the matter of the King's forthcoming wedding to the Princess Magda of Roldem. As she is the only daughter of King Carole, and if anything happens to her brother, Crown Prince Bravos, any child of hers would sit the thrones of both the Isles and Roldem, and as Roldem has long been seen as lying within Kesh's traditional sphere of influence . . . well you can see how we are concerned.'

'My compliments to the Imperial Intelligence Corps, Excellency,' said Arutha in rueful appreciation. Only he and Martin had known.

'Officially, no such group exists, though we do have certain sources - those wishing to maintain the status quo.'

'I appreciate your candour, Excellency. We also must concern our discussions with the question of a new Keshian war fleet being constructed in Durbin in violation of the Treaty of Shamata.'

Lord Hazara-Khan shook his head and said with affection, 'Oh, Arutha, I look forward to bargaining with you.' 'And I with you. I'll order the guards to allow your party to leave at will. I only ask that you ensure that no one not of your retinue slips out in disguise.'

'I shall stand at the gate and name every soldier and servant as they Pass, Highness.'

Arutha had no doubts he would be able to do just that.

"No matter what fate brings, Abdur Rachman Memo

Hazara-Khan, even should we someday face each other across a battlefield, I will count you a generous, honourable friend.' He extended his hand.

Abdur took it. 'You do me honour, Highness. As long as I speak with Kesh's voice, she will negotiate only in good faith, towards honourable ends.'

The Ambassador signalled for his companions to join him, and after asking Arutha's leave they departed.

Martin came to Arutha's side and said, 'At least we now have one fewer problem for the moment.'

Arutha nodded in agreement. 'For the moment. That wily old fox will probably end up with this palace for his embassy and I'll be left with some flophouse near the docks to hold court in.'

"Then we shall need to have Jimmy recommend one of

the better ones to us.' Suddenly struck by a thought,

Martin said, 'Where is he? I've not seen him since we questioned Laughing Jack.'

'Out and about. I had a few things for him to do.'

Martin indicated understanding and the two brothers continued down the hall.

Laurie spun at the sound of someone entering his room. Carline closed the door behind her, then stopped as she observed the singer's travel bundle resting next to his lute upon his bed. He had just finished tying it and he wore his old travel clothing. Her eyes narrowed and she nodded once, knowingly. 'going somewhere?' Carline's tone was icy. "Just thought you'd take a quick run up to Sarth and ask a few questions, right?"

Laurie raised his hands in supplication. 'Just for a while, beloved. I'll be quickly back.'

Sitting down on the bed, she said, "oh~ You're as bad as Arutha or Martin. You'd think everyone in the palace didn't possess the brains to blow their noses without one of you telling them how. So you'll get your head lopped off by some bandit, or . . . something. Laurie, I get so angry sometimes.' He sat next to her and placed his arm around her shoulders. She leaned her head against his shoulder. "We've had so little time together since we arrived, and everything is so . . . terrible.' Her voice broke as she began to cry. 'Poor Anita,' she said after a while. Defiantly wiping away her tears, she went on, 'I hate it when I cry.

'And I'm still angry with you. You were going to run off and leave without a goodbye. I knew it. Well, if you go, don't come back. Just send a message about what you find out - if you live that long - but don't set foot in this palace. I don't ever want to see you again.' She rose to her feet and made for the door.

Laurie was after her in an instant. He took her by the arm and turned her to face him. "Beloved, please . . . don't . . .'

With tears in her eyes she said, "if you loved me, you'd ask Lyam for my hand. I'm done with sweet words, Laurie. I'm done with vague unease. I'm done with you.' Laurie felt panic overtake him. He had been ignoring Carline's earlier threat to be through with him or married to him by the time she returned to Rillanon, as much from choice as from the pressure of events. 'I wasn't going to say anything until this business with Anita was resolved, but - I've decided. I can't let you leave me out of your life. I do want to marry you.'

Suddenly her eyes were wide. 'What?'

'I said I want to marry - '

She covered his mouth with her hand. Then she kissed him. For a long silent moment no words were necessary.

She pushed away, a dangerous half-smile on her face. Shaking her head in the negative, she spoke softly. 'No. Say nothing more. I'll not have you fog my mind again with honeyed words.' She slowly walked to the door and opened it. 'Guards!' she called and in an instant a pair appeared. Pointing at an astonished Laurie, she said, 'Don't let him move. If he tries to leave, sit on him!' Carline vanished from sight down the hall, and the guards turned amused expressions on Laurie. He sighed and sat down quietly upon his bed.

A few minutes later the Princess was back, an irritated Father Tully in tow. The old prelate had his night robe hastily gathered about him, as he had been almost ready for sleep. Lyam, looking equally inconvenienced, followed his sister. Laurie fell backwards onto the bed with an audible groan as Carline marched into the room and pointed at him. "He told me he wants to marry me!" Laurie sat up. Lyam regarded his sister with an astonished expression. "Should I congratulate him or have him hung? From your tone it's difficult to tell."

Laurie bolted upright as if stuck by a needle and moved towards the King. 'Your Majesty -'  
'Don't let him say anything,' interrupted Carline, pointing an accusatory finger at Laurie. In a menacing whisper, she said, 'He is the king of all liars and a seducer of the innocent. He'll talk his way out of it.'

Lyam shook his head as he muttered, 'innocent?' Suddenly his face clouded. 'Seducer?' He fixed his gaze upon Laurie.

"Your Majesty, please," began Laurie.

Carline crossed her arms and impatiently tapped her foot on the floor. 'He's doing it,' she muttered. 'He's talking his way out of marrying me.'

Tully interposed himself between Carline and Laurie.

"Majesty, if I may?"

Looking confused, Lyam said, "I wish you would."

Tully looked first at Laurie, then at Carline. 'Am I to understand, Highness, that you wish to wed this man?'

'Yes!'

'And you, sir?'

Carline began to say something, but Lyam cut her off.

"Let him speak!"

Laurie stood blinking at the sudden silence. He shrugged as if to say he didn't understand the commotion.

'Of course I do, father.'

Lyam looked close to the end of his patience. 'Then what is the difficulty?' He said to Tully, "Post banns, oh, next week sometime. After the last few days we should wait a bit. We'll have the wedding after . . . things settle a bit. If you have no objections, Carline?' She shook her head, her eyes moist. Lyam continued, "Someday, when



you're an old married lady with dozens of grandchildren, you'll have to explain all this to me.' To Laurie he said, 'You're a braver man than most,' then, with a glance at his sister, added, 'and luckier than most.' He kissed her on the cheek. 'Now, if there's nothing else, I'll retire. Carline threw her arms around his neck and gave him a fierce hug. 'Thank you.'

Still shaking his head, Lyam left the room. Tully said, 'There must be a reason for this urgent need of betrothal at this late hour.' He held his hands palms out and quickly added, 'But I'll wait to hear it some other time. Now, if you'll excuse me - ' He gave Carline no opportunity to say anything as he almost dashed from the room. The guards followed after, closing the door behind them. Carline smiled at Laurie after they were alone. "Well, it is done. Finally.' Laurie grinned down at her as he put his arms about

her waist. "Yes, and with little pain.'

"Little pain!" she said, punching him in the stomach with not inconsiderable effect. Laurie doubled over, the wind knocked out of him. He fell backwards, landing upon his bed. Carline came to the edge of the bed and knelt next to him. As he tried to sit up, she pushed him back on the bed with her hand on his chest. "What am I, some dowdy drudge you must endure for the sake of political ambitions?" She playfully pulled at the leather thongs of his tunic. 'I should have you thrown in the dungeon. Little pain, you monster.'

Gripping a handful of her dress, he yanked her forward, bringing her face close enough to be kissed. With a grin, he said, 'Hello, my love.' Then they were in each other's arms. Later, Carline roused from a half-doze to say, 'Happy?'

Laurie laughed, causing her head to jiggle on his chest where it lay. 'Of course.' Stroking her hair, he said, 'What was all that about with your brother and Tully?' She chuckled. 'After almost a year of trying to get you to marry me., I wasn't about to let you forget you proposed. For all I knew, you were simply trying to get rid of me so you could sneak away to Sarth.'

'Sweet good night!' said Laurie, jumping out of bed 'Arutha!'

Carline turned and settled back into the just-vacated pillow. 'So you and my brother are both sneaking off.'

"Yes - no, I mean - oh hell.' Laurie pulled on his trousers and stood looking about. "Where is my other boot? I'm at least an hour overdue.' When he was dressed, he came to sit next to her on the bed. "I must go. Arutha won't let anything stop him. You knew that.' She held tightly to his arm. "I knew you'd both go. How do you plan to get out of the palace?'

~Jimmy.' She nodded. "There's an exit he forgot to mention to

the royal architect, I expect.'

"Something like that. I must go.'

She clung to his arm for a moment. "You didn't take your vows lightly, did you?'

'Never.' He bent over to kiss her. "Without you, I am nothing.' Silently she cried, feeling at once filled and empty knowing for certain she had found her life's mate and fearing to lose him. As if reading her thoughts, he said, "I'll be back, Carline. nothing could keep me from you.' 'if you don't, I'll come after you.'

With a quick kiss he was gone, the door closing quietly behind him. Carline burrowed deeply into the bed, holding on to the last remaining warmth of him as long as she could.

Laurie slipped through the door into Arutha's suite while the guards in the hall were at the far end of their walking tour. In the dark he heard his name whispered. "Yes,' he replied. Arutha unshuttered a lantern, lighting the room. The single light source made the antechamber of Arutha's suite appear cavernous. Arutha said, 'You're late.' To Laurie he and Jimmy appeared alien figures as they stood lit from below by the yellow lantern glow. Arutha wore simple mercenary garb: knee-high cavalier boots, heavy woollen trousers, a heavy leather jerkin over a blue tunic. and his rapier belted at his side. Over all he wore a heavy grey cloak, the deep hood thrown back over his shoulders, but what caused Laurie to stare for a moment was the light that seemed to come from Arutha's eyes. About to embark upon the journey to Sarth at last, he was afire with impatience.

'Lead the way.' Jimmy showed them to a low hidden door in the wall,

and they entered. Through the ancient tunnels of the palace Jimmy moved quickly, down to a level deeper than even the damp dungeon. Arutha and Laurie kept quiet, though the singer was given to an occasional silent oath when something he stepped on scampered away or squished. He was pleased at the lack of good light.

Suddenly they were moving up rough stone steps.

At the top landing, Jimmy pushed upwards against a protesting section of seemingly blank stone ceiling. It moved slightly and Jimmy said, 'it's a tight squeeze.' He wiggled through and took their belongings as they passed them along. The base of an outer stone wall had been cleverly counterweighted to swing from one side, but age and disuse had made it stubborn. Arutha and Laurie managed to wriggle through. Arutha said, "Where are we?"

'Behind a hedge in the royal park. The postern gate to the palace is about a hundred and fifty yards off that way,' answered Jimmy. He indicated a direction. "Follow me.' He led them through thick shrubbery and into a stand of trees, in which three horses waited. Arutha said, "I didn't ask you to purchase three mounts.' With an insolent grin, visible in the moonlit night,

Jimmy said, 'But you also didn't tell me not to, Highness.' Laurie decided it was best not to get involved, so he busied himself tying his bundle to the nearest mount. Arutha said, 'We move quickly, and I've no patience for this. You may not come, Jimmy.'

Jimmy moved towards one of the mounts and nimbly jumped up into the saddle. 'I don't take orders from nameless adventurers and unemployed bravos. I'm the Prince of Krondor's Squire.' He patted his bundle behind the saddle and removed his rapier - the very one Arutha had given him. "I'm ready. I've stolen enough horses to be a fair rider. Besides, things seem to happen wherever you are. It may get very dull around here without you.' Arutha looked at Laurie, who said, 'Better bring him along where we can watch him. He'll only follow behind if we don't.' Arutha seemed about to protest when Laurie said, "We can't call the palace guards to have him arrested. '

Arutha mounted, obviously not pleased. Without further conversation, they turned their horses and rode away from the park. Down darkened alleys and narrow streets they moved, riding at a moderate pace so as not to attract undue attention. Jimmy said, 'This way lies the eastern gate. I assumed we would leave by the north.' Arutha said, 'We'll be heading north soon enough. Should anyone see me leave the city, I'd just as soon have word passed I've gone east.'

"Who's going to see us?' said Jimmy lightly, knowing

full well that anyone seen riding through the gate at this hour would be noticed.

At the eastern gate two soldiers watched from the gatehouse to see who passed, but as there was neither curfew in effect nor alarm being sounded they barely stirred to watch the three riders pass.

Beyond the walls they were in the outer city, erected

when the ancient walls could no longer contain the population. Leaving the main eastern roadway, they moved between darkened buildings towards the north. Then Arutha pulled up his horse and ordered Jimmy and Laurie to do likewise.

Coming around the corner

were four riders dressed in heavy black cloaks. Jimmy's sword was out instantly, the chance of two groups of travellers innocently happening across one another on this minor street at this hour being very slight. Laurie began to draw his also, but Arutha simply said, 'Put away your weapons.'

When the riders closed, Jimmy and Laurie exchanged questioning looks. 'Well met,' said Gardan as he turned his horse to come alongside Arutha. 'All is ready.'

'Good,' said Arutha. Studying the riders with Gardan, he said, 'Three?'

Gardan's good-natured chuckle could be heard in the gloom. 'As I hadn't seen him about for some time, I thought Squire Jimmy might have decided to come along, with or without your permission, so I took precautions. Am I incorrect?'

'You are not, Captain,' said Arutha, taking no pains to hide his displeasure.

'In any event, David here is your shortest guardsman, and should any attempt pursuit, from a distance he will resemble the boy.' He waved the three riders along and they headed back down the street towards the eastern road. Jimmy chuckled as they rode away, for one of the guards had been a slender, dark-haired fellow and the other a blond, bearded man with a lute over his back.

'The guards at the gate seemed to pay scant attention,' said Arutha.

'Have no fears on that account, Highness. They're the two biggest gossips in the night watch. Should word of your departure leak from the palace, within hours the entire city will know you were seen riding east. Those three riders will continue on until they reach Darkmoor, if they are not troubled before then. If I may suggest we'd best be leaving at once.'

'We?' said Arutha.

'Orders, Sire. Princess Carline instructed me that should any harm befall either of you' - he indicated Laurie and Arutha - 'I needn't return to Krondor.'

Sounding a note of mock injury, Jimmy said, 'She said nothing about me?'

The others ignored the remark. Arutha looked at Laurie, who sighed deeply. 'She had it figured out hours before we left.' Gardan indicated that this was so.

'Besides, she can be circumspect when the occasion warrants. Sometimes.'

Gardan added, 'The Princess wouldn't betray her brother or fiance.'

'Fiance?' said Arutha. 'This has been a busy night. Well, you would end up either driven from the palace or married to her. But I'll never understand her taste in

men. Very well, it looks as if there's no getting rid of any of you. Let's be off.'

'The three men and a boy spurred their mounts and resumed their ride and within minutes were through the -outer city, heading north towards Sarth.

Near midday, the travellers rounded a bend in the coast road to find a lone traveller sitting by the edge of the King's Highway. He wore a hunter's outfit of green-dyed leather. His dappled horse cropped grass a short way off and he whittled at a piece of wood with his hunting knife. Seeing the band approach, he put away his knife, tossed the wood aside, and gathered up his belongings. He was 'cloaked and had his longbow over his shoulder when Arutha reined in.

"Martin," said Arutha in greeting.

The 'Duke of Crydee mounted. 'Took you a lot longer to get here than I thought it would.'

Jimmy said, "Is there anyone in Krondor who doesn't know the Prince has left?"

"Not so as you would notice," answered Martin with a smile. They commenced riding, and Martin said to Arutha, "Lyam said to tell you he will lay as many false trails as possible."

Laurie said, 'The King knows?'

'Of course,' said Arutha. He indicated Martin. "The three of us planned this from the start. Gardan had an unusually large number of guards posted near the door to my study when Lyam forbade my going.'

Martin added, 'Lyam has some of his personal guards impersonating each of us. There's a long-faced fellow and a blond, bearded lout impersonating Arutha and Laurie.' With one of his rare grins he said, 'There's this handsome brute of a man staying in my suite. Lyam's even managed to borrow that tall, loud-voiced Master of Ceremonies from the Keshian Ambassador. He's to sneak back into the palace after the Keshians leave today. Fitted with a false beard, he's a fair likeness for the captain here. At least he's the right colour. He'll be seen popping up here and there in the palace.' Gardan laughed.

'Then you've not attempted to leave unnoticed, in truth,' said Laurie in admiration.

"No," said Arutha. 'I seek to leave under a cloud of

confusion. We know whoever is behind this is sending more assassins this way, or so Laughing Jack believed. So if there are spies in Krondor, they'll not know for days what is happening. When we are discovered out of the palace, they'll be unsure of the direction taken. Only those few with us when Pug ensorcelled Anita's suite know we need to travel to Sarth.'

Jimmy laughed. 'A masterstroke of misdirection. Should someone hear you've gone one way, then another, they'll not know what to believe.'

Martin said, "Lyam was thorough. He has another band dressed like you three heading down south towards Stardock with Kulgan and Pug's family today. They'll be just clumsy enough in hiding to be noticed.' To Arutha he added, "pug says he will search for a cure for Anita in Macros's library.'

Arutha reined in his horse and the others halted. 'We are a half day's ride from the city. If we're not overtaken by sundown, we can count ourselves free of pursuit. We need then only worry about what may lie ahead.' He paused, as if what he was about to say was difficult. 'Behind all the bantering words, you've chosen danger, all of you.' He looked from face to face. "I count myself fortunate for such friendship.'

Jimmy seemed the most embarrassed by the Prince's words, but he fought back the urge to gulp. 'We have had a vow in the Mockers. It's from an old proverb:

"You can't be sure the cat is dead until the cat is skinned." When a difficult task lay ahead and a man wished to let others know he was willing to stick it out to the last, he'd say, "Until the cat is skinned.'" He looked at the others and said. 'Until the cat is skinned.'

Laurie said, "Until the cat is skinned,' and the statement was quickly echoed by Gardan and Martin.

At the last, Arutha said, 'Thank you all.' He spurred his horse forward and the others followed.

Martin fell in beside Laurie. 'What took you so long?'

'I was held up,' said Laurie. "It's somewhat complicated. We're going to be married.'

"I know that. Gardan and I were waiting for Lyam when he came back from your room. She could, I think, do better.' Laurie's face betrayed his discomfort. Then Martin smiled slightly as he added, 'But then, maybe she couldn't.' Leaning over, he extended his hand. 'May you always be happy.' After they shook, he said, "That still doesn't account for the delay.'

'it's a bit delicate,' Laurie said, hoping his future brother-in-law would let the matter drop.

Martin studied Laurie a long moment, then nodded in understanding. 'A proper goodbye can take a while.'

9

Forest

A band of horsemen appeared on the horizon. Black figures stood outlined against the reddish sky of late afternoon. Martin sighted them first, and Arutha

ordered a halt. Since they had left Krondor, this was the first band of travellers they had encountered obviously not traders. Martin squinted. "I can't see much at this distance, but I think them armed. Mercenaries perhaps?' 'Or outlaws,' Gardan said.

'Or something else,' Arutha added. 'Laurie, you're the most travelled among us. Is there another way?'

Laurie looked about, getting his bearings. Pointing towards the forest on the other side of a narrow strip of farmland, he said, "to the east, about an hour's ride from here, is an old trail that leads up into the Calastius Mountains. It was used by miners once, but it's little travelled now. It will lead us to the inland road.'

Jimmy said, 'Then we should make for that trail at once. It seems those others have tired of waiting for us to come to them. '

Arutha saw the riders on the horizon start in their direction. 'Lead the way, Laurie.'

They left the road, heading for a series of low stone walls that marked the farms' boundaries. "Look,' shouted Jimmy.

Arutha's companions saw the other band had reacted by spurring their mounts into a gallop. In the orange glow of the late afternoon, they were black figures out-lined against a grey-green hillside.

Arutha and the others took the first low stone wall in a smooth jump, but Jimmy was nearly thrown. He managed to right himself without losing too much ground on the others. He said nothing but wished fervently there weren't three more walls between himself and the forest. Somehow he managed to keep seated and still not be too far behind when Arutha's party entered the woods.

The others were waiting for him and he reined in.

Laurie pointed. 'They can't overtake us, so they parallel us, hoping to intercept us north of here.' Then he laughed.

'This trail is north-east bound, so our nameless friends will have to travel an additional mile of brush-clogged woodlands to cut our trail. We'll be long past them when they do. If they can find the trail.'

Arutha said, "We still must hurry. We've little light, and the woods are not safe at the best of times. How long to this road?'

'We should be there two hours after sunset, maybe a little sooner.'

Arutha motioned for him to lead the way. Laurie turned his horse and they all moved deeper into the rapidly darkening forest.

Dark boles bulked on both sides. In the gloom, with scant illumination from middle and large moons glitering down through high branches, the woods seemed a surrounding

solid. Throughout the night they had been picking their way along what Laurie insisted was a trail, some ethereal thing that suddenly appeared a few feet before Laurie's horse and just as quickly vanished a few feet behind Jimmy's. To Jimmy one patch of ground looked much like another, except that the meandering way Laurie chose seemed to have slightly less debris cluttering it. The boy constantly looked back over his shoulder, seeking signs of pursuit.

Arutha ordered a halt. 'We've seen no signs of being followed. Perhaps we've shaken them.'

Martin dismounted. 'Not likely. If they have a skilled tracker among them, they've found our spoor. They'll be moving as slowly as we are, but they'll be keeping pace.'

Dismounting, Arutha said, 'We'll rest here for a while.

Jimmy, break out the oats behind Laurie's saddle.'

Jimmy grumbled slightly as he began caring for the horses. He had learned after his first night on the road that, as Squire, he was expected to care for his liege's horse - and everyone else's as well.

Martin shouldered his bow and said, 'I think I'll backtrack a ways and see if there's anyone close. I'll be back within the hour. Should anything happen, don't wait for me. I'll find you at the Ishapian abbey tomorrow night.'

He slipped off into the gloom.

Arutha sat on his saddle, while Jimmy set about caring for the horses, with assistance from Laurie. Gardan kept a vigil, scanning the murk of the forest.

Time passed and Arutha became lost in thought. Jimmy watched him from the corner of his eye. Laurie caught Jimmy studying Arutha in the dim light and moved alongside the boy, helping him brush down Gardan's horse. The singer whispered, 'You worry about him.'

Jimmy only nodded, a gesture almost lost in the dark.

Then he said, 'I don't have a family, singer, or a lot of friends. He's . . . important. Yes, I worry.'

When he was finished, Jimmy crossed to where Arutha sat staring off into the blackness. 'The horses are fed and groomed.'

Arutha seemed pulled from his brooding. 'Good. Now get some rest. We'll move out at first light.' He glanced about. 'Where's Martin?'

Jimmy looked back along the trail. 'He's still back there somewhere.'

Arutha followed his gaze.

Jimmy settled in, his head on his saddle, a blanket pulled about him. He stared off into the darkness for a long time before sleep came.

Something woke Jimmy. Two figures approached and Jimmy made ready to leap to his feet when he saw



they were Martin and Gardan. Then Jimmy remembered Gardan had remained on watch. They reached the small campsite, both walking quietly.

Jimmy roused the others. Arutha wasted no time when he saw his brother had returned. "Did you find any sign of pursuit!"

Martin nodded. 'A few miles back along the trail. A band of . . . men, moredhel, I don't know which. Their fire was low. One at least is a moredhel. Save that one, to a man they were dressed in black armour, with long black capes. Each wore a strange helm that covered the entire head. I didn't need any more to decide they were not likely to prove friendly. I cut a false trail across ours. It should lead them away for a while, but we should be off at once.'

"What of this one moredhel? You say he wasn't attired

like the others?'

'No, and he was the biggest damn moredhel I've ever seen, barechested except for a leather jerkin. His head was shaved save for a long scalp lock that was tied so it hung behind like a horse's tail. I could see him clearly in the firelight. I've never seen his like, though I've heard of his sort.'

Laurie said, 'Yabon mountain clan.'

Arutha looked at the singer. Laurie explained, "When I was growing up near Tyr-Sog, we'd hear of raids by the northern mountain clans. They're different from the forest dwellers. The topknot of hair says he's also a chieftain, an important one.'

Gardan said, 'He's come a long way.'

"Yes, and it means some new order has been established

since the Riftwar. We knew that many of those driven north by the Tsurani were seeking to join their kin in the Northlands, but now it seems they've brought some of their cousins back with them.'

"Or," said Arutha, "it means they're under his command.' Martin said,

"For that to have happened . . .'

'Alliance, a moredhel alliance. Something we've always feared,' said Arutha. "Come, it's almost light, and We won't puzzle this out any better for standing still.'

They readied their horses, and soon they were back on the Forest Road, the major inland road between Krondor and the north. Few caravans used it, while it was a timesaver, most travellers chose to travel through Krondor 'and up the coast, as that was the safer route. Laurie claimed they were now riding even with the Bay of Ships, about a day's ride from the Ishapian abbey at Sarth. The town of Sarth rested on a peninsula at the north end of

the bay. The abbey was in the hills to the northeast of the town, so they'd intercept the road between the abbey and the town. If they pushed, they would reach the abbey just after sundown. Out in the forest there was no hint of danger, but

Martin judged it likely the moredhel-led band was coming. He could hear subtle changes in the early morning sounds of the forest behind that told him something not too distant was disturbing the natural order of things in its passing. Martin rode beside Arutha, behind Laurie. "I think I

might drop back and see if our friends still follow.'

Jimmy hazarded a glance over his shoulder, and through the trees behind he could see black-clad figures following. "Too late. they've seen us!" he shouted.

Arutha's party spurred their mounts forward, the thunder of hooves echoing through the trees. All bent low over the necks of their mounts, and Jimmy kept glancing back. They were putting distance between themselves and the black riders, for which Jimmy gave silent thanks. After a few minutes of hard riding, they came to a deep defile, impossible for horses to jump. Across it stood a sturdy wooden bridge. They sped over it, then Arutha reined in. "Stand here!" they turned their horses, for the sound of pursuit could be heard.

Arutha was about to order them to ready a charge when Jimmy leapt off his horse. He pulled his bundle from behind his saddle. Running to the end of the bridge he knelt. Arutha shouted, 'What are you doing?' Jimmy's only answer was 'Keep back!'

In the distance the sound of approaching horses grew louder. Martin leapt down from his mount and unshouldered his longbow. He had it strung and an arrow nocked when the first of the black riders came into view. Without hesitation he loosed the cloth-yard shaft, and without error it flew, striking the black-armoured figure full in the chest with the thundering force only a longbow could deliver at such a distance. The rider was propelled backwards out of his saddle. The second horseman avoided the fallen man, but a third was thrown as his mount stumbled over the body.

Arutha moved forwards to intercept the second rider, who was about to cross the bridge. "No!" shouted Jimmy. 'Keep back!' Suddenly the boy was dashing away from the bridge as the black rider crossed. The horseman was almost upon the spot where Jimmy had knelt when a loud whooshing noise sounded, accompanied by a large cloud of smoke. His horse shied and spun on the narrow bridge, then reared up. The animal stumbled back a step, its rump striking the rails of the bridge. The black-clad warrior was tossed backwards over the rail while his horse

pawed the air, then he fell, hitting the rocks below the bridge with an audible thud. The horse turned and fled back the way it had come.

Arutha's and the others' horses were far enough away from the explosion of smoke not to panic, though Laurie had to ride forward and quickly grab the reins of Jimmy's mount while Gardan held Martin's. The bowman was busy shooting at the approaching riders, whose animals bucked and shied as their masters fought to bring them back under control.

Jimmy was now racing back towards the bridge, a small flask in his hands. He pulled a stopper from its end and tossed it at the smoke. Suddenly the near end of the

bridge erupted in flames. The black riders pulled up, their horses nickering at sight of the flames. The balking animals rode in circles as their riders sought to force them across the bridge.

Jimmy stumbled away from the blaze. Gardan swore, 'Look, the fallen ones rise!'

Through the smoke and flame they could see the rider with the arrow in his chest staggering towards the bridge, while another that Martin had felled was slowly rising to his feet.

Jimmy reached his horse and mounted. Arutha said, 'What was all that?'

'The smoke bomb I carry out of habit. Many of the Mockers use them to cover escape and create confusion. They make a little fire and a great deal of smoke.'

'What was in the flask?' asked Laurie.

'Distillation of naphtha. I know an alchemist in Krondor who sells it to farmers to start fires when they slash and burn.'

'That's damned dangerous stuff to be toting around,' said Gardan. 'Do you always carry it?'

'No,' said Jimmy as he mounted. 'But then I usually don't travel where I'm likely to run into things you can only stop by roasting. After that business at the whorehouse I thought it might come in handy. I have one more in my bundle.'

'Then toss it!' shouted Laurie. 'The bridge's not caught

yet.'

Jimmy pulled out the other flask and nudged his horse forward. With careful aim he tossed the flask into the fire.

Flames rose up, ten, twelve feet in height, as the wooden bridge became engulfed. On both sides of the defile horses whinnied and tried to run as the fire rose higher and higher in the sky.

Arutha looked across the bridge at the enemy horsemen,

who now sat patiently waiting for the flames to burn out. From behind them another figure rode into view, the unarmoured moredhel with the scalp lock. He sat watching Arutha and the others, no expression evident 'on his face. Arutha could feel blue eyes boring into his soul. And he felt hate. Here, then, for the first time he saw his enemy, saw one of those who had harmed Anita. Martin began shooting at the black riders, and with a silent signal the unarmoured moredhel led his companions back into the trees.

Martin mounted and came to his brother's side. Arutha watched as the moredhel vanished into the trees. Arutha said, "He knows me. We were so clever, and they knew where I was all along."

'But how?' asked Jimmy. 'There were so many diversions.'

"Some black art," said Martin. "There are powers at play here, Jimmy."

'Come,' said Arutha. "They'll be back. This will not stop them. We've gained only a little time."

Laurie led the way towards the northbound road to Sarth. They did not look back as the fire crackled loudly.

For the rest of that day they rode nearly continuously. Of their pursuers they saw nothing, but Arutha knew they were close behind. Near sundown, light fog filled the air .as they neared the coast again, where the Bay of Ships turned the road eastwards. According to Laurie, they would reach the abbey after sundown.

Martin moved up to ride next to Gardan and Arutha, who stared out into the shadows, absently directing his horse. 'Remembering the past?'

Arutha looked at his brother thoughtfully. "Simpler times, Martin. Just remembering simpler times. I rage to be done with this mystery of Silverthorn and have Anita returned to me. I burn for it!" He spoke with sudden passion. With a sigh, his voice softened as he said, 'I was wondering what Father would have done in my place.'

Martin glanced at Gardan. The captain said, "Exactly what you're doing now, Arutha. Man and boy I knew Lord Borric, and I'll say there's not another more like him in temper than you. All of you are like him: Martin in the way he watches things closely. Lyam reminds me of him when the lighter moods were upon him, before he lost his lady Catherine.'

Arutha asked, 'And I?'

It was Martin who answered. "Why, you think like him, little brother, more than Lyam or I do. I'm your eldest brother. I don't take orders from you only because you wear the title Prince to my Duke. I follow your lead because, more than any man I've known since Father,

you make the right choices.'

Arutha's gaze was distant as he said, "Thank you. That is high praise.' A sound came from the trail behind, just loud enough

to be heard without being identified. Laurie tried to lead as quickly as he could, but the dark and fog confounded his sense of direction. The sun was close to setting, so little light penetrated the deep woods. He could see only a small part of the trail in front of him, twice he' was

forced to slow down to separate the true trail from false ones. Arutha rode up beside and said, 'Keep it steady, Better to continue at a crawl than halt.'

Gardan fell back next to Jimmy. The boy peered into the woods, seeking a glimpse of whatever might be hiding just behind the boles of the trees, but only wisps of grey fog in the last light of the setting sun could be seen.

Then a horse came crashing from out of the brush, one moment not there, the next nearly knocking Jimmy from the saddle. The boy's horse spun in a full circle as the black-armoured warrior pushed past. Gardan swung a late blow at the horseman and missed.

Arutha shouted, "This way.' and tried to force his way past another horseman cutting across the trail. He faced the rider, the unarmoured moredhel. For the first time Arutha could see the three scars cut into each of the Dark Brother's cheeks. Time froze for an instant as the two confronted one another. There was a strange recognition in Arutha, for here was his enemy made flesh. No longer did he struggle with unseen assassins' hands in the dark or mystic powers without substance, here was someone he could vent his rage upon. Without sound the moredhel swung a vicious blow at Arutha's head, and the Prince avoided being decapitated only by ducking over the neck of his horse. Arutha lashed out with his rapier and felt its point dig in. He came up and saw he had taken the moredhel in the face, cutting deeply across the scarred cheek. But the creature only moaned, a strange tortured sound, half gurgle, half strangled cry. Then Arutha realized the moredhel possessed no tongue. The creature looked at Arutha for a brief moment and turned his horse away.

'Try to break free.' shouted Arutha, spurring his own horse forward. Suddenly Arutha was away, the others behind.

For an instant it seemed the moredhel-led company was too shocked to react to the break, but then the pursuit began. Of all the mad rides in Arutha's life, this one stood out as the maddest. Through the forest, shrouded with fog and night's black cloak, they dashed among trees, following a road little wider than a path.

Laurie passed Arutha, taking the lead.

For long minutes they raced through the woods, somehow avoiding the certainly fatal error of leaving the roadway. Then Laurie was shouting, 'The road to the abbey!'

Slow to react, Arutha and the others behind Laurie barely made the turn onto a larger road. As they steered their mounts onto the new path, they could see the faint large moon rising. Then they were out of the woods, racing down a well

travelled road passing through farmlands. Their horses were lathered and panting, and they spurred them on to more heroic efforts, for while the black riders were not gaining on them, they were not falling behind either.

They sped through the dark, climbing upwards, as the road rose out of the gentle hills around a plateau that dominated the valley farmlands near the coast. The road narrowed and they strung out along it in single file, Martin pulling in until the others were past.

The trail became treacherous and they were forced to slow, but so were those behind. Arutha dug his heels into his horse's sides, but the animal had given all it had left to climb this road.

The evening air was heavy with haze and unseasonably cold. The hills were widely spaced, lazy rolling ridges that gently rose and fell. The highest could be climbed in less than an hour. All were covered in wild grasses and brush, but they were free from trees, for this had been farm' land.

The abbey at Sarth sat atop a high, craggy place, a small mountain rather than a hill, an upthrust thing of rock and granite facings, flat on top like a table.

Gardan looked downwards as they hurried up the side of the mount and said, 'i'd not want to storm this place, Highness. You could hold this road with six grandmothers wielding brooms . . . forever.'

Jimmy looked back but couldn't see their pursuers in the gloom. "So tell those grannies to get back there and slow down the black riders,' he shouted.

Arutha looked behind, expecting to be overtaken by black riders at any second. They rounded a curve and followed the road upwards to the summit. Suddenly they stood before the arched entrance to the abbey.

Beyond the wall a tower of some sort could be seen in the moonlight. Arutha pounded on the gates and shouted, 'Hello! We seek aid.' Then all heard what they had waited for, the pounding of horses' hooves upon the hard road. Drawing weapons, Arutha's party turned to face those who followed.

. The black riders rounded the curve before the abbey

gates, and the battle was again joined. Arutha ducked and parried as he tried to protect himself. The attackers seemed possessed of unusual frenzy, as if there was a need to quickly dispatch Arutha and his party. The scarfaced moredhel nearly rode over Jimmy's mount to reach Arutha, his disregard for the boy being the only reason Jimmy survived. The Dark Brother headed straight for Arutha. Gardan, Laurie, and Martin all strove to keep the black riders at bay, but they were on the verge of being overwhelmed at last.

Suddenly it was light on the road. As if full daylight multiplied ten-fold had burst forth in the gloom, a dazzling brilliance surrounded the combatants. Arutha and the others were forced to cover their eyes, which watered from the blinding light. They could hear muffled moans from the black-clad figures around them, then the sound of bodies hitting the ground. Arutha peeked through narrowed lids behind his upraised hand and saw enemy horsemen falling stiffly from their saddles. The exceptions were the unarmoured moredhel, who shielded his eyes against the sudden light, and three of the armoured riders. With a single motion the mute rider waved his three companions away and they turned and fled down the road. As soon as the black riders were out of sight, the brilliant light began to diminish.

Arutha wiped tears from his eyes and began to pursue but Martin shouted, "Stop. Should you overtake them it's your death. here we have allies!" Arutha reined in loath to lose his opponent. He returned to where the others stood rubbing their eyes. Martin dismounted and knelt over a fallen black rider. He pulled off a helm and quickly stood away. "It's a moredhel, and it smells as if it's been dead for some time." He pointed at its chest. "This is one I killed at the bridge. My broken arrow is

still in its chest.'

Arutha looked at the building. "That light is gone. Whoever our unseen benefactor is, he must feel we no longer need it.' The gates in the wall before them slowly began to open. Martin handed the helm up for Arutha's inspection. It was a strange thing, fashioned with a dragon carved in bas-relief on top, its downswept wings covering the sides. Two narrow slits provided vision for the wearer, and four small holes allowed him to breathe. Arutha tossed the helm back to Martin. "That's an ill-aspected piece of ironmongery. Bring it along. Now let's visit this abbey.'

'Abbey,' Gardan observed as they entered. 'it looks more like a fortress.' Tall, iron-banded heavy wooden gates straddled the roadway. To the right a stone wall a dozen feet high stretched away, appearing to run to the

other edge of the mountaintop. To the left the wall receded, facing upon a vertical drop over a hundred feet to a switchback in the roadway below. Behind the wall they could see a single tower, several floors high. 'if that isn't an old-style keep tower, I've never seen one,' said the captain. 'I'd not want to storm this abbey, Highness. It's the most defensible position I've seen. Look, there's not five feet of clearing between the wall and cliff anywhere.' He sat back in the saddle, in obvious appreciation of the military aspects of the abbey's design. Arutha spurred his horse forward. The gates were now open', and, seeing no reason not to, Arutha led his companions onto the grounds of the Ishapian abbey at Sarth.

10

Sarth

The abbey appeared deserted.

The courtyard reflected what they had seen from the road. This had once been as a fortress. Around the ancient tower a larger single-storey keep building had been added, as well as two outbuildings that could be seen peeking from behind it. One appeared to be a stable. But before them no sign of movement could be seen.

'Welcome to Ishap's Abbey at Sarth,' came a voice from behind one of the gates.

Arutha had his sword halfway from its scabbard before the speaker added, 'You have nothing to fear.'

The speaker stepped from behind the gate. Arutha put away his weapon. As the others dismounted, the Prince studied the man. He was stocky, of middle years, short, With a youthful smile. His brown hair was cut close and ragged and his face was clean-shaven. He wore a simple brown robe gathered around the waist with a single leather thong. A pouch and some manner of holy symbol hung at his waist. He was unarmed, but Arutha got the impression that the man moved like one who had been

trained in arms. Finally

Arutha said, 'I am Arutha, Prince of Krondor.'

The man looked amused, though he didn't smile. 'Then welcome to Ishap's Abbey at Sarth, Highness.'

'You mock me?'

"No, Highness. We of the Order of Ishap maintain little contact with the outside world, and few visit with us, let alone royalty. Please forgive any insult, if your honour permits, for none was intended.'



Arutha dismounted and, fatigue in his voice, said, "it is I who asks forgiveness . . . .

'Brother Dominic, but please, no apologies. It is clear from the circumstances of your arrival you were hardpressed.' Martin said, 'Do we have you to thank for that mystic

light?' The monk nodded. Arutha said, "There seems a great

deal to speak of, Brother Dominic.'

'There are many questions. You'll have to wait upon the Father Abbot's pleasure for most answers, Highness. Come, I'll show you to the stable.'

Arutha's impatience wouldn't let him wait a moment longer. "I came on a matter of the utmost urgency. I need to speak with your Abbot. Now.'

The monk spread his hands in a gesture indicating it was outside his authority to decide. "The Father Abbot is unavailable for another two hours. He is meditating and praying in the chapel, with the others of our order, which is why I alone am here to greet you. Please, come with me.' Arutha seemed ready to protest,, but Martin's hand

upon his shoulder settled him. "Again, I am sorry, Brother Dominic. We are, of course, guests.'

Dominic's expression indicated that Arutha's temper was a matter of no consequence. He led them to the second of the smaller buildings behind what was once a central keep. It was indeed a stable. The sole occupants at the moment were another horse and a stout little donkey, which cast an indifferent eye upon the newcomers.

As they tended their animals, Arutha spoke of their trials over the last few weeks. When he finished, he said, "How did you manage to confound the black riders?' 'My title is Keeper of the Gates, Highness. I may admit any to the abbey, but no one with evil intent can cross the portals without my leave. Once upon the grounds of this abbey, those who sought your life became subject to my power. They took a risk attacking you so close to the abbey. It was a risk that proved deadly to their cause. But further conversation on this and other subjects must wait upon the Father Abbot.'

Martin said, "if everyone else is at chapel, you'll need some help disposing of those corpses. They have an irritating habit of coming back to life.'

'I thank you for the offer, but I can manage. And they will remain dead. The magic employed to topple them cleansed them of the controlling evil. Now you must rest.'

They left the stable and the monk led them to what appeared to be a barracks. Gardan said, 'This place has a martial look to it, brother.'

Entering a long room with a single row of beds, the

monk said, "In ancient times this fortress was home to a robber baron. The Kingdom and Kesh lay far enough away for him to be a law unto himself, pillaging, raping, and robbing without fear of retribution. After some time he was turned out by the people of the surrounding towns, made bold by his tyranny. The lands below this escarpment were given over to farming, but so deep was their hatred of the baron that this keep stood abandoned. When a mendicant friar of our Order of Wanderers discovered this place, he sent word back to the temple in the city of Kesh. When we sought the use of this place as an abbey, the descendants of those who had turned out the Baron had no objection. Today only those of us who serve here remember the history of this place. To those in the towns and villages along the Bay of Ships this has always been the Abbey of Ishop at Sarth.'

Arutha said, 'I assume this was once a barracks.'

Dominic said, "Yes, Highness. We now use it as an infirmary and a place for occasional guests. Make yourselves comfortable, for I must be about my own tasks

The Father Abbot will see you shortly.'

Dominic left and Jimmy fell onto one of the beds with an audible sigh. Martin inspected a small stove at one end of the room and found it lit, with the makings for tea next to it. He immediately set a pot to boil. Under a cloth he found bread, cheese, and fruit, which he passed around. Laurie sat examining his lute for possible travel damage and began tuning it. Gardan sat down opposite the Prince.

Arutha sighed long and deeply. "I am on a ragged edge. I fear these monks will have no knowledge of this Silverthorn.' For an instant his eyes betrayed his anguish, then he again showed only an impassive expression.

Martin cocked his head to one side as he thought aloud. "Tully seems to think they know a great deal.'

Laurie put up his lute. 'Whenever I've found myself close to magic, priestly or otherwise, there also I've found trouble.'

Jimmy spoke to Laurie. 'That Pug seemed a friendly enough fellow for a magician. I wanted to speak to him more, but . . .' He left unsaid the events that had prevented it. 'There's little about him that seems remarkable, but the Tsurani seem to fear him, and some of the court whisper about him.'

"There is a saga begging to be sung,' answered Laurie.

He told Jimmy of Pug's captivity and rise among the Tsurani. 'Those who practise arcane arts on Kelewan are a law unto themselves, and whatsoever they command is done without hesitation. There is nothing like them on this world. That is why the Tsurani in LaMut hold him in

awe. Old habits die hard.'

Jimmy said, 'He gave up a great deal to return, then.'

Laurie laughed. "That wasn't entirely a matter of choice. '

Jimmy said, "What's Kelewan like?"

Laurie spun a rich and colourful story of his adventures on that world, with the eye for detail that lay at the heart of his craft, as much as did good voice and playing skills. The others settled in, relaxing and drinking their tea while listening. They all knew the story of Laurie and Pug and their part in the Riftwar, but each time Laurie told the story it was again a riveting adventure, one with the great legends.

When Laurie finished, Jimmy said, 'it would be an adventure to go to Kelewan.'

"That is not possible,' observed Gardan, 'i'm glad to

say. '

Jimmy said, "If it was done once, why not again?"

Martin said, "Arutha, you were with Pug when Kulgan read Macros's letter explaining why he closed the rift.'

Arutha said, "Rifts are wild things, spanning some impossible no-place between worlds, possibly across time as well. But something about them makes it possible to know where they're going to come out. When one is fashioned, then others seem to "follow" it, coming out in the same general area. But that first one is the one you can't control. That's as much as I understand. You'd have to ask Kulgan or Pug for more details.'

Gardan said, "Ask Pug. If you ask Kulgan, you'll get a lecture. '

"So Pug and Macros closed down the first one to end the war?" said Jimmy.

'And more,' said Arutha.

Jimmy looked around the room, sensing they all knew something he was not privy to. Laurie said, "According to Pug, there was in ancient times a vast evil power known to the Tsurani only as the Enemy. Macros said it would find its way to the two worlds if the rift was left open, drawn to it as steel to a lodestone. It was a being of awesome strength that had destroyed armies and humbled mighty magicians. Or at least that is what Pug explained.'

Jimmy cocked his head to one side. "This Pug is that important a magician, then?"

Laurie laughed. "To hear Kulgan tell it, Pug is the most powerful practitioner of the magic arts there is since Macros's death. And he's cousin to the Duke and the Prince, and the King.'

Jimmy's eyes widened. 'it's true,' said Martin. "Our father adopted Pug into our family.'

Martin said, "Jimmy, you speak of magicians as if

you've never had dealings with one.'

'I know better. There are a few spellcasters in Krondor, and they tend to be a questionable lot. There was once among the Mockers a thief known as the Grey Cat, for his stealth was unmatched. He was given to bold theft and filched some bauble from a magician who viewed the deed with considerable disfavour.'

"What became of him?" asked Laurie.

"He's now the grey cat.'

The four listeners sat quietly for a moment, then comprehension dawned and Gardan, Laurie, and Martin burst into laughter. Even Arutha smiled at the joke and shook his head in amusement.

Conversation continued on, easy and relaxed, as the band of travellers felt secure for the first time since leaving Krondor.

The bells sounded from the main building and a monk entered. Silently he motioned for them to come. Arutha said, "We're to follow you?" The monk nodded. 'To see the Abbot?' Again the monk nodded.

Arutha was off his bed, all fatigue forgotten. He was the first out of the door behind the monk.

The Abbot's chamber befitted one given to a life of spiritual contemplation. It was austere in every aspect. But what was surprising about it was the bookshelves upon the walls, dozens of volumes at every hand. The Abbot, Father John, seemed a kindly man of advancing years, slender and ascetic in appearance. His grey hair and beard showed in stark contrast to dark skin that was lined and wrinkled like carefully carved mahogany. Behind him stood two men, Brother Dominic and one Brother Anthony, a tiny stooped-shouldered fellow of indeterminate age, who constantly squinted at the Prince. The Abbot smiled, his eyes crinkly at the corners, and Arutha was suddenly put in mind of paintings of Old Father Winter, a mythical figure who gave sweets to children at the Midwinter's Festival. In a deep, youthful voice the Abbot said, 'Welcome to Ishap's Abbey, Highness. How may we help you?'

Arutha quickly outlined the history of the last few weeks.

The Abbot's smile vanished as Arutha's story unfolded. When the Prince was finished, the Abbot said, 'Highness, we are gravely troubled to hear of this necromancy at the palace. But as to the tragedy that has befallen your Princess, how may we aid you?'

Arutha found himself reluctant to speak, as if at the last his fear of there being no aid overwhelmed him.

Sensing his brother's reticence, Martin said, (A conspirator to the assassination attempt claims a moredhel gave

him the poison used, one prepared with arcane skills. He called the substance Silverthorn.'

The Abbot sat back, sympathy evident in his expression. 'Brother Anthony?'

The little man said, 'Silverthorn? I'll begin looking in the archives at once, father.' With a shuffling step, he quickly departed the Abbot's chambers. Arutha and the others watched the bent figure leave the room. Arutha asked, 'How long will it take?'

The Abbot said, 'That depends. Brother Anthony has a remarkable ability to pull facts seemingly from out of the air, remembering things read once in passing a decades before. That is why he has risen to the rank of Head Archivist, our Keeper of Knowledge. But the search could take days.'

Arutha clearly didn't understand what the Abbot was speaking about, and the old priest said, 'Brother Dominic, why don't you show the Prince and his companions a little of what we do here at Sarth?' the Abbot rose and bowed slightly to the Prince as Dominic moved towards the door. 'Then bring him to the base of the tower. ' He added to Arutha, 'I will meet with you shortly, Highness. They followed the monk out into the main hall of the abbey. Dominic said, 'This way.' He led them through a door, then down a flight of stairs to a landing from which four passages branched off. He took them past a series of doors. As they walked, he said, 'This hill is unlike those around, as you must have noticed when you rode here. It is mostly solid rock. When the first monks came to Sarth, they discovered these tunnels and chambers underneath the keep. '

'What are they?' asked Jimmy.

They came to a door and Dominic produced a large ring of keys, which he used to open the heavy lock. The door swung open ponderously, and after they had stepped through, he closed it behind. 'The original robber baron used these excavations as storage rooms, against siege and to hoard booty. He must have grown lax in his defence for the villagers to have laid successful siege. there is enough room here for stores to last years. We have added to them until the entire hill is honeycombed with vaults and passages.'

"To what end?" asked Arutha.

Dominic indicated they should follow him through another door, this one unlocked. They entered a large vaulted chamber, with shelving along the walls and freestanding shelves in the centre of the room. Each shelf was packed solid with books. Dominic crossed to one and took down a book. He handed it to Arutha.

Arutha studied the old volume. It had faded gilt lettering burned into the binding. There was a faint resistance

when Arutha carefully opened it, as if it had not been handled in years. On the first page he saw alien letters of an unknown language, painstakingly lettered in a stiff script. He lifted the book before his face and sniffed at it. There was a faint, pungent odour on the pages. As Arutha handed the book back, Dominic said, "Preservative. Every book here has been treated to prevent deterioration.' He gave the book to Laurie. The widely travelled singer said, "I don't speak this tongue, but I think it Keshian, though it is unlikely any scribing of the Empire's I know.' Dominic smiled. 'The book is from the south part of Great Kesh, near the border of the Keshian Confederacy. It is the diary of a slightly mad but otherwise insignificant noble from a minor dynasty, written in a language called Low Delkian. High Delkian, as best we can ascertain, was a secret language limited to priests of some obscure order.'

"What is this place?' asked Jimmy.

'We who serve Ishap at Sarth gather together books, tomes, manuals, scrolls, and parchments, even fragments. In our order there is a saying: "Those at Sarth serve the hole Knowledge", which is not far from the truth. Whenever one of our order finds a scrap of writing, it or a copy is eventually sent here. In this chamber, and in every other chamber under the , abbey, are shelves like these. All are filled, even to the point of being crowded from floor to ceiling, and new vaults are constantly being dug. From the top of the hill to the lowest level there are over a thousand chambers like this one. Each houses several hundred volumes or more. Some of the larger vaults hold several thousand. At last tally we were approaching a half-'million works.' Arutha was stunned. His own library, inherited with

the throne of Krondor, numbered less than a thousand. "How long have you been gathering these?" "over three centuries. There are many of our order

who do nothing but travel and buy any scrap they can find, or who pay to have copies made. Some are ancient, others are in languages unknown, and three are from another world, having been obtained from the Tsurani in LaMut. There are arcane works, auguries and manuals of power, hidden from the eyes of all but a few of the most highly placed in our order.' He looked about the room, 'And with all this, there is still so much we don't understand.'

Gardan said, "How do you keep track of it all?" Dominic said, 'We have brothers whose sole task is to catalogue these works, all working under Brother

Anthony's direction. Guides are prepared and constantly

updated. In the building above us and in another room deep below are shelves of nothing but guides. Should you need a work on a subject, you can find it in the guides. It will list the work by vault number - we are standing in vault seventeen - shelf number, and space number upon the shelf. We are attempting to cross-index each work by author, when known, and title as well as subject. The work goes slowly and will take all of another century.' Arutha was again overwhelmed by the sheer size of such an undertaking. 'But against what ends do you store all these works?'

Dominic said, 'in the first, for the sake of knowledge itself. But there is a second cause, which I will leave for the Abbot to explain. Come, let us join him.'

Jimmy was the last through the door, and he cast a rearward glance at the books in the room. He left with the feeling that he was somehow gaining a glimpse of worlds and ideas heretofore unimagined, and he regretted he would never fully understand most of what lay beneath the abbey. He felt somehow lessened for this realization. For the first time, Jimmy felt his world a small one, with a much larger yet to be discovered.

Arutha and his companions waited for the Abbot in the large chamber. Several torches threw flickering illumination upon the walls. Another door opened and the Abbot entered, followed by two men. Brother Dominic was the first through, but the other was unknown to Arutha. He was an old man, large and still erect in his bearing, who despite his robes seemed to resemble a soldier more than a monk, an impression heightened by a war hammer hanging from his belt. His grey-shot black hair had been left to grow to shoulder length but, like his beard, it was neatly trimmed. The Abbot said, 'It is time for plain speaking.'

Arutha said with a bitter edge, 'That would be appreciated.'

The unnamed monk broke into a broad grin. 'You've your father's gift for blunt speech, Arutha.'

Arutha studied the man again, surprised by his tone.

Then recognition struck. It had been more than ten years since he had seen this man. 'Dulanic!'

'No longer, Arutha. Now I'm simply Brother Micah, Defender of the Faith. . . which means I crack heads for ,ishap now as I used to for your cousin Erland.' He patted the hammer at his waist.

We thought you dead.' Duke Dulanic, former Knight-Marshal of Krondor, had vanished when Guy du Bas-Tyra had assumed the viceroyalty over Krondor during

the last year of the Riftwar.

The man called Micah seemed surprised. "I thought everyone knew. With Guy on the throne of Kronador and Erland near death from coughing sickness, I feared civil war. I retired from office rather than face your father in the field or betray my King, two unthinkable choices. But I made my retirement no secret."

Arutha said, "With Lord Barry dead, it was assumed you'd both fallen by Guy's hand. No one knew what had become of you."

"Strange. Barry died of a seizure of the heart and I informed du Bas-Tyra of my intention to take holy vows. His man Radburn stood at his side when I gave my resignation."

Martin said, "That would explain it, then. With Jocko Radburn drowned off the Keshian coast and Guy banished from the Kingdom, who would have the truth to tell?"

The Abbot spoke. "Brother Micah came to us a troubled man, called by some agency of Ishap to our service. We tested him and found him worthy, so that now his former life as a noble of the Kingdom is a thing of the past. But I asked him here because he is both a valued adviser and a man of military skills who may help us understand what forces move in the world these days."

"Well enough. Now, what business have we besides

finding a cure to Anita's injury?"

"The understanding of that which brought her to injury. that which seeks to end your days, for a start," answered Micah.

Arutha looked slightly abashed. "Of course, forgive my preoccupation. I would welcome anything that made sense out of the madness my life has become over the last month."

The Abbot said, "Brother Dominic has shown you something of our works here. He may have mentioned that we count many auguries and other works by prophets in our collection. Some are as reliable as a child's moods, which is to say not at all. But a few, a very few, are true works of those whom Ishap has given the gift of future seeing. In several of these volumes, among the most ancient we possess, a reference is made to a sign in the sky.

"There is, we fear, a power now loose in the world. What it may be and how it may be combatted are yet unknown to us. But this is certain: it is a fell power, and at the end either it shall be destroyed or it shall destroy us. That is inescapable." Pointing upwards, the Abbot said, "The tower above us has been converted to study the stars, planets, and moons, using clever devices built



for us by some of the more talented artificers in the Kingdom and Kesh. With them we can chart the movements of all the bodies in the sky. We spoke of a sign. You may now see it. Come.'

He led them all up a long flight of stairs that took them to the top of the tower. They emerged upon the roof, amid strange devices of confounding configuration. Arutha looked about and said, 'it is well you understand this, father, for I do not.'

'Like men,' said the Abbot, 'the stars and planets have both physical and spiritual properties. We know other worlds spin their orbits about other stars. We know this for fact, since' - he pointed to Laurie - 'one who has lived for a time on an alien world stands with us at this moment.' When Laurie looked astonished, the Abbot said, 'We are not so cut off from the rest of the world that something as important as your adventures on Kelewan would not be heard here, Laurie of Tyr-Sog.' Returning to his original topic, he said, 'But that is the physical side of the stars. They also reveal secrets to those who watch by their arrangement, their pattern, and their movement. Whatever the reason for this phenomenon, this we know: at times a clear message comes to us from the night sky, and we who are bent on gaining knowledge will not refuse to heed such a message, we will remain open to every source of knowledge, including those often held in disrepute. 'The mysteries of these devices, as well as reading the stars, are only a matter of taking the time to master the subject. Any man of sufficient wit can learn. These devices,' he said with a sweep of his hand, 'are all quite clear in use and purpose once they've been demonstrated. Now, if you'll please look through this device here. Arutha looked through a strange sphere, constructed from a complex latticework of metals. "This is used to chart the relative motion of stars and visible planets.' "You mean there're invisible ones?' asked Jimmy without thinking. 'Correct,' said the Abbot, overlooking the interruption,

'Or at least there are those we can't see, though if we were close enough they would be visible.'

"Part and parcel of the arts of divination is the science

of knowing when the auguries are in fruition, at best a chancy business. There is a famous prophecy made by the mad monk Ferdinand de la Rodez. By common account, it has come to pass on three different occasions, No one can agree which event was the one he predicted.' Arutha studied the sky through the device, only half listening to the Abbot. Through the eyehole he saw a sky ablaze with stars, overlaid with a faint network of lines and notations, which he assumed were somehow inscribed

on the inside of the sphere. In the centre was a configuration of five stars, reddish in colour, one in the centre, with lines connecting them in a bright red X. 'What am I seeing?' he asked. He relinquished his place to Martin and the former hunter looked through the device. The Abbot said, "Those five stars are called the Bloodstones. ' Martin said, "I know them, but I've never seen that pattern before.' "Nor shall you again for another eleven thousand years

- though that is a guess, and we shall have to wait until it occurs again to be sure.' He seemed unperturbed by the duration, in fact he seemed quite willing to wait. "What you see is a pattern called the Fiery Cross or cross of Fire. There is an ancient prophecy concerning it.' "What is this prophecy, and what has it to do with me?" asked Arutha.

"The prophecy comes from near the time of the Chaos Wars. It says, "'When the Cross of Fire lights the night and the Lord of the West dead is, shall then return the Power.'" It's quite well constructed poetically in the original, though it loses in translation. What we take it to mean is that some agency seeks your death to cause this prophecy's fulfilment, or at least seeks to convince others the prophecy's near fruition. Another germane fact is that the prophecy is one of the few things we have that were created by the Pantathian serpent people. We know little about these creatures. We know that on those rare 'occasions when they appear they herald troubles, for they are' clearly agents of evil working towards ends only they understand. We also know that the prophecy says the Lord of the West is also called Bane of Darkness.' "So someone wants Arutha dead because he is fated to beat them if he lives?' asked Martin.

. "Or so they believe,' answered the Abbot. 'But who or what?' said Arutha. "That someone wishes me dead comes as no revelation. What more can you tell me?" 'Little, I'm afraid.'

Laurie said, 'Still, it gives some small reason behind the Nighthawks' attacks upon you . '

'Religious fanatics,' said Jimmy, shaking his head, then

he looked at the Abbot. "Sorry, father.'

The Abbot ignored the remark. "What is important to understand is that they will try again and again and again. You will not be done with them until you root out the ultimate author of the order to kill you.'

'Well,' said Martin, "we also know that the Brotherhood of the Dark Path is involved.'

"North,' said Brother Micah. Arutha and the others

looked at him questioningly. 'Your answers lie northward, Arutha. Look there,' he said, his voice still containing a note of command. 'To the north lie the High Ranges, all barriers against the denizens of the Northlands. In the west above Elvandar perch the Great Northern Mountains, in the east, the Northern Guardians, the High Fastness, and the Dreaming Mountains. And across the centre lies the greatest range of all, the Teeth of the World, thirteen hundred miles of nearly impassable crags. Who knows what lies beyond? What man, save renegade or weapons runner, has ventured there and returned to tell of the Northlands?

our ancestors created the Border Baronies ages ago, to bottle up the passes at Highcastle, Northwarden, and Ironpass. The Duke of Yabon's garrisons block the only other major pass to the west of the Thunderhell Steppes. And no goblin or Dark Brother treads upon the Thunderhell and lives, for the nomads do our guarding for us. In short, we know nothing of the Northlands. But that is where the moredhel live and that is where you'll find your answers.' 'Or I'll find nothing,' said Arutha. 'You may be concerned about prophecy and portents, but I care only for finding the answer to the riddle of Silverthorn. Until Anita is again safe, I shall put my efforts to nothing else. The Abbot appeared disturbed by this. Arutha said, 'That there is a prophecy I have no doubt, and that some Madman with arcane powers is seeking my death is also not in doubt. But that this spells some great danger to the Kingdom is a long reach. Too long for me. I'll need more proof.'

The Abbot was about to answer when Jimmy said 'What is that?'

All eyes turned to look where he pointed. Glowing low on the horizon was a blue light, brightening as if a star were growing before their eyes. Martin said, "It looks like a falling star.'

Then they could see it was no star. A faint sound in the distance accompanied the approaching object. Brighter it grew, as the sound grew louder, more angry. Racing across the sky towards them was a blue fire. Suddenly it was speeding directly over the tower with a sizzling sound, like a hot iron passing through water.

Then Brother Dominic shouted, 'Off the tower quickly!'

11

Clash

They hesitated for a moment.

Dominic's warning was followed by a shout from Micah, and the others hurried down the stairs. Halfway to

the ground floor, Dominic faltered, swaying a little on his feet. "Something approaches."

Reaching the main floor, Arutha and the others hurried to the door and looked out. In the sky above, more of the glowing objects streaked overhead with unbelievable speed. First from one quarter of the sky, then another, they sped, their strange, ominous droning filling the night. Faster and faster they shot through the air, streaks of blue, green, yellow, and red, angry flashes of brilliance ripping through the dark.

'What are they?' shouted Jimmy.

'Magic sentinels of some kind,' answered the Abbot. "I

can sense they are searching the area they pass over.' Slowly the pattern changed, instead of passing directly overhead, they began to curve and fly off at a tangent to their original course. Those below could see that the objects were slowing in their flight. The curving course tightened, until the glowing objects sped through the night in great arcs overhead. Then they slowed even more, gaining definition. They were large spheres, pulsing with a bright inner light, and inside could be seen strange dark shapes, somehow disturbing in appearance. They continued to slow until they hovered and spiralled, forming a circle above the abbey courtyard. Once the circle was formed, twelve glowing spheres could be seen hanging silently and motionless over the courtyard. Then, with a deep snapping, buzzing sound painful to the ears, lines of energy shot across the gap between each pair and six lines joined the spheres. Then a line formed around the periphery so that now the spheres formed a dodecagon. 'What are these things?' Gardan wondered aloud.

'The Twelve Eyes,' the Abbot said in awe, 'an ancient and evil spell of legend. No one living is said to have the power to form this thing. It is both a vehicle for seeing and a weapon.' Then the spheres slowly began to move. Gaining speed, they began weaving an intricate pattern, the lines twisting maddeningly, beyond the ability of the eye to follow. Faster they spun, until they became a blurring solid of light. A shaft of energy shot down from the centre striking some invisible barrier above the roofs of the buildings.

Dominic screamed in pain and had to be caught by Martin. The monk's hands pressed hard against his temples and he said, 'So powerful. I can scarcely believe the barriers are holding.' He opened eyes running with tears.' Father John said, 'Brother Dominic's mind is the keystone to the mystic defences of the abbey. He is being sorely tested.'

Again angry energies shot downwards, to be scattered

across the invisible barrier, like a multicoloured shower above their heads. Shards of mystic rainbow light streaked down the sides of the magic barrier, 'defining the dome above the abbey for the eye to see. But again the barrier held. Then another, and another, and soon Arutha and the others could see that the barrier was being pushed lower each time. With each assault, Dominic would cry out in pain. Then, with explosive fury, a single shaft of blinding white light struck the barrier and broke through, searing the ground with an angry hiss and acrid odour. With the attack, Brother Dominic stiffened in Martin's arms and groaned. 'it is entering,' he whispered before he passed into unconsciousness.

As Martin lowered the monk to the floor, Father John said, 'I must go to my vestry. Brother Micah, you must hold it.'

Micah told them, 'Whatever is out there has breached a mystic defence second only to that at our father'temple. Now I must face it. I am armed and shielded by Ishap,' the old monk said in ritual, as he unlimbered the war hammer at his belt.

A roar of impossible volume, like a thousand lions voicing rage at once, shook the abbey. It began as a teeth-jarring shriek and ran down the scale until it seemed to grind at the very stones of the building. Bolts of energy lashed out, seemingly in random directions, and where they struck, destruction ensued. Stones seemed to crumble under the onslaught, whatever was flammable was set afire, and any water touched by the bolts exploded into clouds of steam. They watched as Micah left the building, striding out to stand below the spinning disk. As if anticipating, he raised his hammer above his head as another bolt of energy lashed downwards, blinding those who watched from the door. When the initial blaze of white died down, they could see Micah standing upright, hammer held overhead as the crackling energies cascaded around him, scattering in broken spectrum, so that all the colours of the rainbow danced within the inferno. The very ground at his feet smoked and burned, but he was unharmed. Then the flow of energy halted, and in an instant Micah had pulled back his hammer and made his throw. Almost too quick for the eye to follow, the hammer left his hand and became a blur of blue-white energy as bright and blinding as its target. Higher than was possible for a man to throw, the bolt of flame sped, striking the blazing disk dead centre. It seemed to bounce off the disk, and the blue bolt returned to Micah's hand. The thing lashed out at Micah again, but once more he was protected by the hammer's mystic powers. Again he cast his hammer as soon as the rain of light ceased, striking it at the heart. As the hammer returned, those inside the abbey could

see that the thing was beginning to wobble slightly as it spun. A third time he cast his hammer and it struck, Suddenly there was a rending sound, a tearing so loud that Arutha and the others were forced to cover their ears. The circling spheres shattered, and from the centre of each plunged small alien shapes. With a wet, plopping noise they struck the ground, wiggled grotesquely, and began to smoke. A high keening shriek filled the night as they erupted into brilliant flame. No one could discern the true forms of the creatures from the spheres, but Arutha was filled with a sense it was something best left undiscovered, for in the instant they ignited, the shapes resembled nothing so much as horribly disfigured babies. Then the night was silent, as a rain of sparkling colours, like fine motes of glass star stuff, began to fall on the abbey. One by one the motes flared and winked out, until the old monk stood silently in the court, his war hammer held before him.

Those who stood in the shelter of the abbey looked at one another, astonishment on their faces. For a long moment they said nothing, then they began to relax. "That was . . . incredible," said Laurie. "I don't know if I could find the words to describe it."

Arutha was about to speak, but something in the way Jimmy and Martin both cocked their heads to one side made him stop. Jimmy said, "I hear something." They all stood silent for a moment, then could hear a distant sound, as if some great bird or bat flapped giant wings in the night.

Jimmy ran from the building before anyone could stop him, nearly spinning as he scanned every quarter of the night sky. Looking back over the roof of the abbey, towards the north, he saw something that made his eyes widen. 'Banath!' he exclaimed and dashed to where the old monk still stood, unmoving and silent. Micah seemed in some sort of trance, eyes closed. Jimmy gripped his arm and shook him. "Look!" he shouted as the monk opened his eyes.

Micah looked to where the boy pointed. Blotting out the large moon in the night sky was something that flew towards the abbey, propelled on giant, powerful wings. instantly the monk shoved the boy away. "Run."

The push sent Jimmy away from the abbey, so he raced across the courtyard to where a lone wagon sat, filled with fodder for the stable horses, and dived under it. With a roll and a turn, he lay still, watching.

A thing of despair fashioned in a shape of utter horror descended from the sky. Wings a full fifty feet in width flapped lazily as it dropped down to where the old monk stood. It was a twenty-foot-tall composite of everything

loathsome to sane beings. Black talons extended from grotesque parodies of bird claws, atop which rose legs reminiscent of a goat's. But where haunches should have been, only great wattles of fat, huge rings of blubber, shook and quivered, hanging impossibly down from below a manlike chest. Over the body a thick wet-looking substance oozed downwards in rivulets. In the centre of the thing's chest, a blue-coloured but otherwise normal-looking human face stared out in wide-eyed horror, constantly twitching and screaming in gibbering counterpoint to the thing's own loud bellows. Each arm was powerfully fashioned, long and apelike. It shimmered in the faint light, rapidly changing, first red, then orange, then yellow, and onward through the spectrum until it was again red. And from it emitted a mixture of foul odours, as if the vile smell of every decaying and festering thing in the world had been distilled down and infused into the creature's being. Most horrid of all was the head, for in supreme cruelty, whatever or whoever had fashioned the misshapen monster had adorned it with a woman's head, large to fit the body, but otherwise normal. And the ultimate jest was in the features of that face, for, in precise imitation, the thing bore the likeness of Princess Anita. Wild tresses seemed to blow in all directions, framing her features in a cloud of red hair. But its expression was one of a street whore, lewd and wanton, as the thing salaciously licked its lips and rolled its eyes towards Arutha. Blood-red lips split into a wide grin, showing long fangs in place of human eyeteeth.

Arutha looked on the thing with a disgust and loathing that rose up to banish any thought save to destroy this obscenity. 'No!' he shouted as he began to pull his sword.

Gardan was instantly upon him, driving him to the floor of the building, bringing his strength to bear to hold him down, yelling, 'That's what they want!'

Martin lent his strength to stop Arutha, and he and Gardan pulled the Prince away from the door. The creature turned to look at those within the door, absently flexing its claws. Pouting like a little girl, it suddenly leered at Arutha, then stuck out its tongue, wiggling it suggestively. Then with a bellowing laugh, it rose up to its full height and roared at the stars, arms stretched high overhead. With a single step, it moved towards the doorway where the Prince waited. Then suddenly it rocked forwards, shrieked in pain, and turned around. Arutha and his companions looked past it to see a blue-white bolt of energy returning to Brother Micah's hand. He had struck the first blow while the thing had been distracted. Again he cast his hammer. In a blur it flashed to strike the thing in its huge stomach, bringing another bellow of pain and rage, as a trickle of steaming

black blood began to flow.

"oh, my!" came a voice from behind Arutha.

Laurie saw that Brother Anthony had come up from some deep vault beneath the abbey and was peering intently at the creature. Laurie said, "What is that thing?" Showing no emotion except curiosity, the archivist

said, 'I believe it to be a conjured creature, something fashioned by magic means, brewed up in a vat. I can show you some references in a dozen different works on how to create them. Of course, it could be some rare naturally occurring beast, but that seems highly improbable.'

Martin rose, leaving Gardan to restrain Arutha. He unlimbered his ever present bow, quickly strung it, and fitted an arrow to his bowstring. The creature was advancing upon Brother Micah when Martin let fly. The archer's eyes widened as the arrow seemed to pass through the creature's neck without effect.

Brother Anthony nodded. 'Yes, it is a conjuration. Notice how it is impervious to mundane weapons.'

The creature swung one of its mighty fists down at Brother Micah, but the old fighter simply raised his hammer as if to block. The creature's blow halted a full foot above the monk's upraised hammer, recoiling as if it had hit stone. It bellowed in frustration.

Martin turned to Brother Anthony. "How do you kill it?"

"I don't know. Each of Micah's blows draws energy away from the spell used to create it. But it is a product of tremendous magics, and it might last a day or longer. Should Micah falter . . .'

But the old monk was firm on his feet, answering every blow with a parry and wounding the creature, seemingly at will. While it seemed pained by each wound the hammer made, it gave no sign of being weakened.

'How do you make one?' Martin asked Brother Anthony. Arutha was no longer struggling, but Gardan still knelt with his hand upon his shoulder.

Anthony, caught up for a second in Martin's question, said, 'How do you create one?

"Well, it's rather complicated."

The creature became increasingly enraged by Micah's blows and hammered uselessly at the monk. Tiring of this tactic, it dropped to its knees as it levelled a blow at Micah, overhand as if driving a spike with a hammer, but at the last instant it shifted its aim and slammed its massive fist down on the ground next to the monk.

The jolt caused Micah to stumble slightly, which was the only opening the creature needed. Instantly sweeping its hand sideways, it knocked Micah across the courtyard.



The old monk hit the ground heavily, rolled awkwardly and lay stunned, his hammer bouncing away from him. Then the thing was again moving towards Arutha. Gardan leapt to his feet, pulling his sword as he dashed forwards to protect his Prince. The veteran captain stood before the thing, which grinned hideously down at him, the terrible parody of Anita adding a sickening element to the confrontation. Like a cat playing with a mouse, the creature pawed at Gardan.

From out of an inner door, Father John reappeared, holding a large metal staff topped with an odd-looking seven-sided device. He stepped before Arutha, who was trying to move to aid Gardan, and shouted, 'No. you can do nothing.'

Something in his voice told Arutha it was futile to attempt to engage the thing, and the Prince retreated a step. The Abbot turned to confront the conjured creature. Jimmy crawled out from under the wagon and came to his feet. He knew the uselessness of drawing his dirk. Seeing the supine figure of Brother Micah, he ran to see how he fared. The old monk was still senseless, and Jimmy pulled him back towards the relative safety of the wagon. Gardan hacked uselessly at the creature while it played with him.

Jimmy cast about and saw the mystic hammer of Brother Micah lying off to one side. He dived for it and grabbed the haft on the fly, coming to rest on his stomach, eyes upon the monster. The thing had not noticed the boy's recovery of the weapon. Jimmy felt surprise when he lifted it, for it was twice the weight he expected. He rose to his feet and ran to stand behind the monster, confronted by its foul, fur-covered hindquarters, arching above his head as it reached forward to grab Gardan. The captain was seized in a mammoth hand that lifted him towards the widening mouth. Father John raised up his staff and suddenly waves of green and purple energy flowed from it, washing over the creature. It howled in pain and squeezed Gardan, who cried out in concert. Martin shouted, 'Stop. It's crushing Gardan!'

The Abbot ceased his magic and the thing snorted as it tossed Gardan at the door, seeking to injure its tormentors.

The captain slammed into Martin, Brother Anthony, and the Abbot, knocking them to the ground. Arutha and Laurie both sidestepped the flying bodies. The Prince turned to see the leering parody of Anita's face bending towards the door. The creature's wings prevented it from entering the abbey, but long arms came snaking through the door, reaching for Arutha. Martin rose, helping the shaken Abbot and Brother Anthony to their feet. The archivist said, 'Yes! Of course The face in its chest. kill it there!'

Martin had an arrow nocked in an instant, but the

crouching thing hid the target. It reached through the door for Arutha, then suddenly it was sitting back on its haunches. Martin pulled back as he said, "Kilian guide my arrow, and let fly. True to the aim, the shaft flew and struck the insane face in the chest square in the forehead. The eyes in that face rolled up and closed as red, human blood billowed from the wound. The creature stopped rockstill. As all watched in wonder, the creature began to quiver.

It grew instantly more brilliant in colour as the lights within flashed rapidly. Then all could see it was becoming transparent, insubstantial, a thing of coloured glowing smokes and gases, swirling in a mad dance as they slowly dissipated on the night wind. Their lights faded until once again the courtyard was empty and silent.

Arutha and Laurie came up to Gardan, who was still conscious. 'What happened?' the Captain asked feebly. All eyes turned to Martin. He indicated Brother Anthony, who responded, "It was something the Duke asked, how one of those things is made. All the foul arts to make such a being require some animal or human to work upon. That face was all that was left of the poor demented soul who had been used as a focus to create the monster. It was the only mortal part, subject to mundane injury, and when it was killed, the magic . . . unravelled. '

Martin said, 'I'd not have made that shot had it not reared back like that.'

'Most fortunate,' said the Abbot.

'Fortune had little to do with it,' said a grinning Jimmy.

He held Brother Micah's hammer as he approached. "I stuck it up the arse." He indicated the stunned Micah.

'He'll do all right,' he said as he gave the hammer to the Abbot.

Arutha was still shaken by the sight of Anita's face atop that horror. Laurie, with a weak smile, said, "Father, if it wouldn't be too much trouble, have you some wine we might drink? That was the worst smell I've ever endured. '

"ha!" Jimmy said indignantly. 'You should have tried it from my end!'

Arutha watched the dawn break over the Calastius Mountains, the rising sun was an angry red orb. In the hours since the attack the abbey had returned to a semblance of order and quiet, but Arutha felt only turmoil within. Whatever lay behind these attempts upon him was power-far beyond anything he had anticipated, despite clear warning from Father Nathan and the High Priestess of Iims-Kragma. He had grown incautious in his haste to discover a cure for Anita, and such was not his nature.

he could be bold when needed, and boldness had won him several victories, but of late he had not been bold, but 'headstrong and impulsive. Arutha felt something alien, something he had not felt since he was a boy.

Arutha felt doubt. He had been so confident in his planning, but Murmandamus either had anticipated every move or somehow could react with unbelievable speed each time Arutha made a step.

Arutha came out of his musing to see Jimmy beside him. The boy shook his head. 'Just shows you what I've always said.'

Despite his concerns, Arutha 'found himself slightly amused by the boy's tone. 'What is that?'

'No matter how canny you think you are, something can come along, bar, and put you on your prat. Then you think, "That's what I forgot to consider." Eagle-eye hindsight, old Alvarny the Quick used to call it.'

Arutha wondered if the boy had been reading his thoughts. Jimmy continued. "The Ishapians are sitting up here, mumbling prayers to themselves, and convinced they've got a real magic stronghold - "nothing can breach our mystic defences," he mimicked. "Then along come those balls of light and that flying thing and whoops. "We didn't consider this or that!" they've been jabbering about what they should have done for an hour. Well, I guess they'll have something stronger around here soon.' Jimmy leaned back against the stone wall facing the cliff, Beyond the walls of the abbey the valley was emerging from the shadows as the sun reached higher in the sky, 'Old Anthony was telling me that the spells necessary for last night's show took some doing, so he doesn't think anything magic will come this way for a while. They'll be strong in their fortress . . . until something comes along that can kick down the gates again, as it were.'

"Something of a philosopher, are you?" Arutha smiled slightly as Jimmy shrugged. 'Scared to pissing in my trousers is what I am, and you'd do well to be scared as well. Those undead things in Krondor were bad enough, but last night, well, I don't know how you feel about it, but if I were you, I'd consider moving to Kesh and changing my name.'

Arutha smiled ruefully at that, for Jimmy had made him see something he had denied. 'To be honest, I am just as scared as you, Jimmy.'

Jimmy looked surprised at the admission. "Truth?" 'in truth. Look, only a madman would not be fearful - of facing what we have, and what may come, but what matters isn't whether or not you're frightened, but how you behave. My father said once that a hero is someone who simply got too frightened to use his good sense and run away, then somehow lived through it all.'

Jimmy laughed, boyish glee making him seem as youthful as his years rather than the man-boy he looked most of the time. 'That's a truth, too. Me, I'd rather do what needs be done, quickly, and get on to the fun. This suffering for grand causes is the stuff of sagas and legends.'

Arutha said, 'See, there's a bit of the philosopher in you, after all.' He changed topics. 'You acted swiftly last night, and bravely. Had you not distracted the monster so Martin could slay it - '

'We'd be on our way back to Krondor with your bones, assuming it didn't eat them,' finished Jimmy with a wry grin.

'Don't look so pleased at the prospect.'

Jimmy's grin broadened. 'I'd not be, fact is. You're one of the very few I've met worth having around. By most standards this is a merry bunch, though the times are grim. I'm sort of having fun, if the truth be known.' 'You have a strange sense of fun.'

Jimmy shook his head. 'Not really. If you're going to be scared senseless, might as well enjoy it. That's what thieving's about, you know. Breaking into someone's home in the dead of night, not knowing if they're awake and waiting with a sword or club to spread your brains out on the floor when you stick your head in the window.

Being chased through the streets by the city watch. It's not fun, but it sort of is, you know? Anyway, it's exciting. And besides, how many can boast they saved the Prince of Krondor by goosing a demon?'

Arutha laughed hard at that. 'Hang me, but that's the first thing I've had to laugh aloud at since . . . since the wedding.' He placed his hand upon Jimmy's shoulder. 'You earned some reward this day, Squire James. What shall it be?'

Jimmy's face screwed up in a display of hard thinking.

'Why not name me Duke of Krondor?'

Arutha was thunderstruck. He started to speak, but stopped. Martin approached from the infirmary and, seeing such a strange expression on Arutha's face said, 'What ails you?'

Arutha pointed to Jimmy. 'He wants to be Duke of Krondor.'

Martin laughed uproariously. When he quieted, Jimmy said, 'Why not? Dulanic's here, so you know his retirement's not bogus. Volney doesn't want the post, so who else are you going to give it to? I've a fair wit, and I've done you a favour or two.'

Martin continued laughing while Arutha said, 'For which you have been paid.' The Prince was caught between outrage and amusement. 'Look, you bandit, I might think about having Lyam give you a minor barony

- very minor - to take charge of, when you reach your majority, which is at least three years away. For now you'll have to settle for being named Senior Squire of the Court.'

Martin shook his head. 'He'll organize them into a street gang.'

.Well,' said Jimmy, 'at least I'll have the pleasure of seeing that ass Jerome's face when you give deLacy the order.'

Martin stopped his laughing and said, 'I just thought you'd like to know Gardan will be fine, as will Brother Micah. Dominic is up and about already.'

"The Abbot and Brother Anthony?'

'The Abbot is off somewhere doing whatever abbots do when their abbeys have been desecrated. And Brother Anthony is back looking for Silverthorn. He said to tell you he'll be in chamber sixty-seven if you wish to speak with him. '

Arutha said, "I'm going to find him. I want to know what he's discovered.' As he walked away, he said, "Jimmy, why don't you explain to my brother why I should elevate you to the second most important dukedom in the Kingdom?'

Arutha walked off in search of the head archivist.

Martin turned to look at Jimmy, who grinned back at him.

Arutha entered the vast chamber, musty with age and the faint odour of preservatives. By flickering lantern light Brother Anthony was reading an old volume. Without turning to see who entered, he said, "Just as I thought, I knew it would be here.' He sat up. 'That creature was similar to one reported killed when the Temple of TithOnanka in Elarial was invaded three hundred years ago.

it Was certain, according to these sources, that Pantathian serpent priests were behind the deed.'

Arutha said, 'What are these Pantathians, brother? I've only heard the stories told to frighten children."

The old monk shrugged. 'We know little, in truth. most of the intelligent races on Midkemia we can, in some way,'understand. Even the moredhel, the Brotherhood of the Dark Path, have some traits in common with humanity. You know, they have a rather rigid code of honour, though it is an odd sort by our standards. these creatures . . .' He closed the book. "Where Pantathia lies, no one knows. The copies of the maps left pug by Macros that Kulgan of Stardock sent us show no sign of it. These priests have magics unlike any other. They are the avowed enemies of humanity, though they have dealt with some humans in the past. One thing else is clear, they are beings of undiluted evil. For them to serve this murmandamus would mark him a foe of all that is

good if nothing else did. And that they serve him also marks him a power to fear.

Arutha said, 'Then we know little more than what we knew by Laughing Jack's report.'

'True,' said the monk, "but never discount the worth of knowing he spoke the truth. Knowing what things are not is often as important as knowing what they are.'

Arutha said, "in all the confusion, have you discovered anything about Silverthorn?'

"As a matter of fact, I have. I was going to send word

as soon as I finished reading this passage. I have little help to offer, I am afraid.' Upon hearing this, Arutha's heart sank in his chest, but he indicated the old monk should continue. 'The reason I could not quickly bring to mind this Silverthorn is that the name given is a translation of the name with which I am more familiar.' He opened another book lying close by. "This is the journal of Geoffrey, son of Caradoc, a monk at the Abbey of 'Silban west of Yabon - the same one your brother Martin was reared at, though this was several hundred years ago, Geoffrey was a botanist of sorts and spent his idle hour in cataloguing what he could of the local flora. Here I've found a clue. I'll read it. "The plant, which is called Elleberry by the elves, is also known to the people of the hills as Sparkle Thorn. It is supposed to have magic properties when utilized correctly, though the proper means of distillation of the essences of the plant is not commonly known, being required of arcane ritual beyond the abilities of common folk. It is rare in the extreme having been seen by few living today. I have never beheld the plant, but those .with whom I have spoken are most reliable in their knowledge and certain of the plant's existence.'" He closed the book.

'is that all?' asked Arutha. 'I had hoped for a cure, or at least some clue as to how one might be discovered.'

'But there is a clue,' said the old monk with a wink.

'Geofrey, who was more of a gossip than a botanist. attributed the name Elleberry to the plant, as an elver name. This is obviously a corruption of neleberB, an elver word that translates to "'silverthorn Which means that should any know its magic properties and how to overcome them, it is the Spellweavers of Elvandar.'

Arutha was silent for a while, then said, 'Thank you, Brother Anthony. I had prayed to end my search here, but at least you've not dashed all hope.'

The old monk said, 'There is always hope, Arutha ConDoin. I suspect that, in all the confusion, the Abbot never got around to telling you the main reason for our gathering all this.' His hand waved about him, indicating the masses of books everywhere. "The reason we gather

all these works in this mount is hope. Of prophecy and portents there are many, but one speaks of the end of all we' know. It states that when all else has succumbed to the forces of darkness, all that will be left will be "that which was Sarth". Should that prophecy come true, we wish to save the seeds of knowledge that can again serve humanity. We work against that day, and pray it will never come. Arutha said, 'You've been kind, Brother Anthony.'

"A man helps when he may.'

"thank you.'

Arutha left the chamber and climbed the stairs, his mind playing over what he knew. He considered options until he reached the courtyard.

Laurie had joined Jimmy and Martin, as had Dominic, who seemed to have recovered from his ordeal, though he was still pale. Laurie greeted the Prince and said, "Gardan should be well enough tomorrow. '

'Good, for we leave Sarth at first light.'

"What do you propose?" said Martin.

'I'm going to put Gardan on the first ship bound from Sarth for Krondor, and we'll continue on.'

'Continue on where?' asked Laurie.

'Elvandar.

Martin smiled. 'it will be good to visit there again.

Jimmy sighed. Arutha said, "What is it?"

"I was just thinking of your palace cooks and bony horsebacks."

Arutha said, 'Well, don't think on them too long, you're returning to Krondor with Gardan.'

'And miss all the fun?'

Laurie said to Martin, "This lad has a definitely warped

sense of fun.' Jimmy started to speak, but Dominic said, "Highness,

if I may travel with your captain, I wish to journey to Krondor. '

'Of course, but what of your duties?'

'Another will take my office. I will not be fit for that sort of duty for some time, and we cannot wait. There is no shame or dishonour, it is simply necessary.'

'Then I am sure Jimmy and Gardan will welcome your company.

'Wait - ' began Jimmy

Ignoring the boy, Arutha asked the monk, "What sends you to Krondor?"

'Simply that it lies on my route to Stardock. Father John thinks it vital we should inform Pug and the other magicians of what we know to be occurring. They practise mighty arts unavailable to us.'

"That is well taken. We have need of all the allies we can muster. I should have considered that myself. I will give you some additional intelligence to take to them, if

you don't mind. And I'll have Gardan escort you down to Stardock.'

'That would be kind.'

Jimmy had been trying to be heard as he protested being sent back to Krondor. Ignoring his protests, Arutha said to Laurie, 'Take our aspiring young duke here and go down to town and find a ship. We'll follow tomorrow. Also see about some fresher mounts, and don't get into trouble.'

Arutha walked away towards the barracks with Dominic and Martin, leaving Laurie and Jimmy in the courtyard. Jimmy was still trying to make himself heard, and was saying, ". but . . . '

Laurie clapped Jimmy on the shoulder and said, "Come along, "Your Grace". Let's get down the road. If we can finish our business early, we'll see if we can find a game at the inn.'

An evil light seemed to come into Jimmy's eyes at that "Game?' he said.

'You know, something like pashawa, or over-undermaninbetween. Knucklebones or stones. Gambling.'

"oh,' said the boy. "You'll have to show me how.'

As he turned for the stable, Laurie fetched him a kick in the rump, propelling him along. "Show you how, indeed. I'm not some rube in from the farmlands here. I heard that the first time I lost my poke.'

Running forward, Jimmy laughed. "it was worth a try."

Arutha entered the darkened room. Looking down at the figure on the bed, he said, 'You sent for me?'

Micah raised himself up and leant back against the pillows. 'Yes. I hear you're leaving this hour. Thank you for coming.' He indicated Arutha should sit upon the bed. "I need a little sleep, but I'll be fit enough in a week or so. Arutha, your father and I were friends as youngsters. Caldric was just establishing the practice of bringing squires to court that's now taken for granted. We were quite a bunch. Brucal of Yabon was our Senior Squire, and he ran us ragged. In those days we were a fiery crew, your father, myself, and Guy du Bas-Tyra.' At mention of Guy's name, Arutha stiffened but said nothing. 'I like to think we were the backbone of the Kingdom in our day. Now you are. Borric did well with you and Lyam, and Martin brings no shame. I am now serving Ishap, but I still love this Kingdom, son. I just wanted you to know my prayers are with you.'

Arutha said, "Thank you, my lord Dulanic.

He eased himself on his pillows. no longer. I'm just a simple monk now. By the way, who rules in your place?'

"Lyam is in Krondor and will remain until I return.



Volney acts as Chancellor.'

At this Micah laughed, which brought a wince of pain.

'Volney. I shap's teeth. he must hate it.'

"He does,' said Arutha with a smile.

'Are You going to have Lyam name him Duke?

'I don't know. As much as he protests, he's the most able administrator available. We lost some good young men during the Riftwar.' Arutha smiled his crooked smile. "Jimmy suggests I name him Duke of Krondor.'

'Don't sell that one short, Arutha. Train him while you have him. Pile the responsibility on him until he yells and give him more. Educate him well, then take stock.

He's a rare one.' Arutha said, 'Why is this, Micah? Why this concern for

matters you've put behind?'

'Because I'm a vain old man and a sinner, despite my repentance. I still admit to pride in how my city fared.

And because you're your father's son.'

Arutha was silent for a long time, then he said, 'You and Father were close, weren't you?'

'Very. Only Guy was closer to Borric.'

'Guy?' arutha couldn't believe his father's most hated enemy could have ever once been his friend. 'How is that possible?'

Micah studied Arutha. "I thought your father would have told you before he died.' He was silent for a long moment. "Then again, Borric wouldn't.' He sighed. "We who were friends to both your father and Guy, we all took a vow. We vowed never to speak of the shame which caused them to end the closest of friendships, and which caused Guy to wear black every day for the rest of his life, earning him the name Black Guy.'

Arutha said, father once mentioned that strange act of personal courage, though he had no other good to speak of Guy.'

"He wouldn't. And I will not either, for Guy would have to release me from the vow, or be proved dead, before I would speak. But I can say that before that schism they were as brothers. Whether wenching, brawling, or in war, neither was more than a voice's call from the other's aid.

"But look you, Arutha. You have to rise early, and you must get rested. You've no more time to idle away over matters long buried. You must be off to find a cure for Anita . . .' The old man's eyes misted over, and Arutha realized that in his own dark concern for her he had ignored the fact that Micah had always been a member of Erland's household. He had known her since birth. She would be like a granddaughter to him.

Micah swallowed hard. "These damn ribs! Breathe deeply and your eyes water like you're eating raw onion.'

He let out a long sigh. 'I held her in my arms when the priests of Sung the White blessed her, less than an hour after her birth.' His eyes took on a far-off look. he turned his face away and said, 'Save her, Arutha.

'I will find a cure.'

Whispering to control his emotions, Micah said, 'Then

go, Arutha. Ishap protect you.'

Arutha squeezed the old monk's hand for a moment, rose, and left his quarters. Walking across the main hall of the abbey building, he was intercepted by a silent monk who indicated he should follow. He was led to the Abbot's quarters and found the Abbot and Brother Anthony waiting for him.

'it is good you took time to visit with Micah, Highness,' said the Abbot. Suddenly Arutha became alarmed. "Micah will recover,

won't he?'

"if Ishap wills it. He is an old man to be withstanding such an ordeal.' Brother Anthony seemed incensed by the notion and

almost snorted. The Abbot ignored the sound and said, "We have given some thought to a problem that needs to be dealt with."He pushed a small case towards Arutha, who reached over and lifted it from the table.

The case was clearly ancient, of delicately carved wood, and time had worn it almost smooth. When it was opened it revealed a velvet cushion upon which rested a small talisman. It was a bronze hammer, a miniature of that which Micah had carried, a thong passing through a tiny hole in the haft. 'What is it?'

Anthony said, (You must have considered how your foe was able to locate you seemingly at will. It is likely that some agency, perhaps the serpent priest, had located you with a scrying spell of one sort or another. That talisman is a legacy from our ancient past. It was fashioned at the oldest known enclave of our faith, the Ishopian abbey at Long, It is the most powerful artifact we possess. It will mask your movements from all scrying magic. To any who have been following you by arcane means, you will simply vanish from sight. We have no protection from mundane eyes, but if you are cautious and mask your identity, you should be able to reach Elvandar without being intercepted. But never remove it, or you will again be subject to location by sorcery. It will also render you impervious to the sort of attack we endured last night. Such a creature would be unable to harm you - though your enemy may still strike through those about you, for they will not be so protected.'

Arutha placed the talisman around his neck and said, 'Thank you.'

The Abbot rose. "Ishap protect you, Highness, and know you may always find haven here at Sarth." Arutha said thank you again and left the Abbot. As he returned to his quarters and finished rolling his travel bundle, he considered what he had learned. Pushing doubt aside, he determined once again to save Anita.

12

Northward

A lone rider raced up the road.

'Arutha looked back as Martin warned of the approaching horseman. Laurie turned his horse, drawing his sword, Martin began to laugh. Arutha said, 'if that's who I think, I'll have his ears.'

Martin said, 'Then sharpen your knife, brother, for look at the way those elbows flap as he rides.'

Within moments Martin's prediction proved correct, a grinning Jimmy reined in. Arutha took hno pains to mask his displeasure. He said to Laurie, "I tthought you said he was safely upon the ship for Krondor with cardan and Dominic.'

Laurie looked on with an expression of helplessness "I thought he was, I swear.'

Jimmy looked at the three. 'isn't anyone going to say

hello?'

Martin tried to look serious, but even his elver-learned composure was being tested. Jimmy had all the ingenuousness of an eager puppy, as false a pose as most others he assumed, and Arutha was trying hard to keep a stern demeanour. Laurie hid his laughter behind a quickly raised hand and a cough. Arutha shook his head, looking down at the ground.

Finally he said, 'All right, what is the tale?'

Jimmy said, "First of all, I swore an oath, it might not mean much to you, but it is still an oath, and it binds us "until the cat is skinned." And there was one other little thing.'

Arutha said, 'What was it?'

'You were being watched while you left Sarth.'

Arutha sat back in the saddle, as startled by the boy's offhand tone as much as by the revelation. "How can you be certain?'

"In the first, the man was known to me. He's a certain merchant from Questor's View, by name Havram, who is in fact a smuggler employed by the Mockers. He's been absent since the Nighthawks' infiltration was made known to the Upright Man, and he was in the inn where Gardan. Dominic, and I waited for the ship. I went aboard ship

with the good captain and the monk and slipped over the side just before they weighed anchor. Then, in the second. the man was without the normal retinue he employed when working at his normal trade. He is usually a vocal. affable man, given to public display when acting the merchant, but in Sarth he lurked under a heavy cowl and hugged dark corners. He would not be in such a place, ignoring his usual role, unless forced to by unusual circumstances. And he followed you from the inn, until he was clear as to which way you had ridden. But most important of all, he was an ofttime companion of both Laughing Jack and Golden Base.'

Martin said, 'Havram! That was the man Laughing Jack said recruited Golden and him to the Nighthawks.' 'They'll be relying on spies and agents now that they can't use magic to find you,' added Laurie. 'it makes sense they had someone in Sarth waiting for you to come down from the Abbey.'

"Did he see you leave?" asked the Prince.

Jimmy laughed. "No, but I saw him leave.' They all looked at him with questions on their faces, and the boy said, 'I took care of him.'

'You did what?'

Jimmy looked pleased with himself; "Even a town as small as Sarth has its underside if you know where to look. Using my reputation as a Mocker of Krondor, I made myself known and established my bona fides. Certain people who wish to remain anonymous were made to understand I knew who they were - and would be willing to neglect mentioning it to the local garrison in exchange for a service. As they thought I still enjoyed a favoured position in the Mockers, they chose not to deposit me in the bay, especially when I sweetened the deal with a small pouch of gold I carried. I then mentioned there was not a single person in the Western Realm who would miss a certain merchant taking his ease at the inn. They took my meaning. The false merchant is most likely on his way to Kesh via the Durbin slave route even as we speak, learning the finer points of menial labour."

Laurie slowly shook his head. "The boy has a definite hard edge to him.' Arutha heaved a resigned sigh. "It seems I am again in your debt, Jimmy.'

'Jimmy said, "There's a small caravan coming up the road about an hour behind. If we ride slowly they may Overtake us by nightfall. We could most likely hire on as additional guards and ride in with other mercenaries when Murmandamus is out looking for the three riders who left Sarth.'

Arutha laughed. "What am I to do with you?' Before Jimmy could answer, he said, "And don't say anything about being Duke of Krondor.' As he turned his mount

he said, 'And don't tell me where you got that horse.'

Fate, or the efficacy of the Ishopian talisman, served Arutha and his three companions, for they encountered no trouble along the road to Ylith. Jimmy's prediction of a caravan's overtaking them proved accurate. It was a poor thing, consisting of five wagons served by only two bravos hired as guards. Once the merchant in charge was satisfied they were not brigands, he welcomed them as travelling companions - for he gained four additional bodyguards for the price of a few meals.

For two weeks they travelled with little to disrupt the monotony of the journey. Peddlers, traders, and caravans of all sizes, with up to a score of mercenary guards, passed both ways along the coast between Questor's View and Sarth. Arutha was satisfied that should some spy or agent discover him among the throng of bravos riding along the road, it would be by pure chance.

Finally, near sundown, they could see the lights of Ylith in the distance. Arutha rode point with Yanov the merchant's two guards. He held back until the lead wagon was even with him and said, "Ylith ahead, Yanov.'

The lead wagon passed, and the stout merchant, a silk and fine-cloth peddler from Krondor, waved happily.

Arutha had been relieved to discover Yanov an ebullient man, for he paid little attention to what others had to say and Arutha's quickly contrived history had stood up to scrutiny. As far as the Prince could tell, Yanov had never seen him before.

Martin was the first to overtake Arutha, as the last Waggon in the train moved passed him.

"Ylith," said Arutha, kicking his mount into motion.

Jimmy and Laurie crossed the road from where they had ridden flank as Martin said, 'Soon we'll be rid of this train and can see to new mounts. These need a rest.'

Laurie said, 'I'll be pleased to be rid of Yanov. He caches like a fishwife, without a halt.'

Jimmy shook his head in mock sympathy. "And he hardly ever lets anyone else tell a story around the campfire. Laurie glared. Arutha said, 'Enough. We'll be another band of travellers. If Baron Talanque discovers I'm here, It'll turn into a state affair. We'll have feasting, tourneys, hunting, expeditions, and everyone between the Great Northern mountains and Kesh will know I'm in Ylith. Talanque's a good fellow, but he does enjoy his revels.'

jihmmy laughed. "He's not the only one.' With a whoop and a shout, he spurred his horse forward. Arutha, Laurie, and Martin sat amazed for a moment, then the relief of reaching Ylith struck and they were off after the boy.

as Arutha raced past the lead wagon, he shouted,

.Good trading, Master Yanov!' The merchant looked at them as if they'd become bereft of reason. Etiquette required he Pay them a token for their stint at guard. reaching the gates of the city, they slowed, as a caravan of some size had just finished passing into Ylith several other travellers were waiting for it to clear the portals before they could enter. Jimmy reined in behind a farmers hey cart and spun his horse to face his companions as they rode up, laughing at the momentary frolick. Without words they fell into line, watching as soldiers passed the cart through. In these peaceful days, the soldiers seemed to be giving only the most cursory inspection to those passing into the city.

Jimmy looked about, for Ylith was the first large city he'd encountered since they'd left Krondor, and the busy metropolitan rhythm was already making him feel at home. Then near the gates he noticed a lone figure hunkered down, watching those who passed through. From his tartan plaid and leather breeches, it was clear he was a Hadati hillman. His hair fell past his shoulders, but a warrior's topknot was bound high, and he wore a rolled scarf tied above his eyes. Across his knees rested a pair of wooden sheaths, protecting the sharp edges of the long, slender sword and a shorter half-sword common to his people. Most striking about the man was his face, for around the eyes, from forehead down to cheekbones, his face was painted bone-white, as was his chin directly below his mouth. He clearly studied the Prince as he passed, then slowly rose as Jimmy and Martin followed Arutha and Laurie into the city. Jimmy suddenly laughed aloud, as if Martin had joked, and stretched, affording himself a quick glance behind. The hillman was slowly walking through the gates behind them, putting his sword and half-sword in his belt-sash. Martin said, 'The Hadati?' WHen Jimmy nodded, the Duke said, "You've a quick eye. Is he following?" hHe is. Shall we lose him?' Martin shook his head. 'We'll deal with him once we settle somewhere. If we need to.'

As they rode up the narrow streets of the city, they were greeted by signs of prosperity on all sides, for shops burned brightly with lantern light as merchants showed their wares to those out shopping in the cool of the evening. even at this early hour of the evening, revellers were

about in numbers, as guards from caravans and sailors in from months at sea were out in force, seeking whatever pleasures gold could buy. A band of rowdy fighting men, mercenaries by their look, pushed across the street, obviously working on a heroic drunk, yelling and laughing. One bumped against Laurie's horse and, in a display

of mock anger, shouted, "Here now. Watch where you're pointing that beastie. Shall I teach you manners?" He feigned pulling his sword, to the delight of those with

him. Laurie laughed along with the man as Martin, Arutha, and Jimmy kept an eye on potential trouble. 'Sorry, friend,' said the singer. The man made a halfgrimace, half-laugh as he again motioned as if to draw his sword.

Another from the mercenary band pushed him roughly asside and said, 'Go have a drink,' to his companion. Smiling up at Laurie, he said, 'Still can't ride any better than you can sing, Laurie?'

Laurie was off his mount instantly and embraced the man in a bear hug. "Roald, you son of a whoremonger!" They exchanged backslaps and hugs, then Laurie presented the man to the others. 'This black heart is Roald, a friend since boyhood and more than once a companion on the road. His father owned the farm next to my father's. '

the man laughed. 'And our fathers threw the both of us out of home on almost the same day. '

Laurie introduced Martin and Jimmy, but when he reached Arutha used the agreed-upon name of Arthur.

'Pleased to know your friends, Laurie,' said the mercenary.

Laurie cast a quick glance about. 'We're blocking the road. Let's find lodgings.'

'I'm staying at the inn next street over. It's almost civilized.' He waved a hand for them to follow.

Jimmy spurred his horse forward and kept an eye on the friend of the singer, studying the man with a professional eye. He had all the earmarks of a seasoned mercenary, one who had been earning a living with his sword enough to be considered an expert by dint of his still being alive. Jimmy glimpsed Martin looking rearward and wondered if the Hadati still stalked them.

The inn was called the Northerner, respectable enough for a place so near the docks. A stableboy roused himself from a sorry-looking meal to take their horses. Roald said, 'Keep them well, lad.' The boy obviously knew him. Martin tossed the boy a silver coin.

Jimmy watched the boy catch the coin in midair, and as he gave over his horse's reins, he placed the thumb of his right hand between fore- and middle fingers, so the boy could see. A flash of recognition passed between them and the boy gave Jimmy a curt nod.

When they were inside, Roald signalled for the serving girl to bring ale as he pointed to a table in the corner,

near the door to the stable yard and away from the normal Row of customers. Pulling out a chair for himself, Roald discarded his heavy leather gauntlets as he sat. He spoke just loud enough for those at the table to hear, 'Laurie, last time I saw you was what? Six years ago?' You went riding off with a LaMutian patrol to look for Tsurani to write songs about. Now here you are with' he indicated Jimmy - 'this short thief here.'

Jimmy grimaced. 'Highsign?'

'Highsign,' agreed Roald. When the others looked confused, Roald said, 'This lad Jimmy gave the stableboy a sign so the local thieves will keep hands off his kick, Tells them a thief from another city is in town and respecting the conventions and should have the courtesy returned. Right?' Jimmy nodded appreciatively. 'Right. It tells them I

won't . . . work without their leave. Keeps things civilized. The boy will pass the word.'

Quietly Arutha said, 'How did you know?'

'I'm no outlaw, but I'm no saint either. Over the years I've kept all manner of company. Mostly I'm a simple fighting man. Up to a year ago I was a mercenary in the Yabonese Free Levies. Fought for King and country for a silver piece a day and all "that.' His eyes got a distant look. "We'd been on and off the line for seven years. Of the lads who signed aboard with our captain that first year, one in five was left. Each winter we'd stay in LaMut and our captain would go out recruiting. Each spring we'd return to the front with fewer men.' His eyes wavered to the ale before him. 'I've fought against bandits and outlaws, renegades of all stripe. I served marine duty on a warship hunting pirates. I stood at Cutter's Gap where fewer than thirty of us held back two hundred goblins for three days until Brian, Lord Highcastle, could come and fetch us out. But I never thought I'd live to see the day the bloody Tsurani would quit. No,' he said, 'it's glad I am to be standing guard on piddly little caravans the hungriest outlaw in the land wouldn't bother with. My biggest problem these days is keeping awake.' The mercenary smiled. 'Of all my old friends, you were the best, Laurie. I'd trust you with my life, if not my women or money. Let's hoist a round for old times' sake, then we can start telling lies.'

Arutha liked the openness of the fighter. The serving girl brought another round, and Roald paid, over Laurie's protest. "I'm in this very day with a great creaking caravan from the Free Cities. My mouth is caked with a month's worth of road dust, and I'll only waste my gold sooner or later. It might as well be now.'

Martin laughed and said, 'Only the first, friend Roald. The rest are our pleasure.'



Jimmy said, "Have you seen a Hadati hillman around?"  
Roled waved his hand. "They're around. Anyone in particular?"

Martin said, "Green and black tartan on his plaid, white paint on his face."

Roled said, "Green and black's a far northwest clan, couldn't say which. But the white paint . . ." He and Laurie exchanged glances.

Martin said, "What?"

Laurie said, "He's on a Bloodquest."

Roald said, "A personal mission. Some matter of clan honour or another. And let me tell you, honour's no joke to a Hadati. They're as intractable about it as those damn Tsurani up in LaMut. Maybe he has to avenge a wrongdoing, or pay back a debt for his tribe, but whatever it is, only a fool would get in the way of a Hadati on Bloodquest. They tend to be a forward lot with a sword."

Roald finished his drink and Arutha said, "if you will join us, let's share a meal."

The fighter smiled at that. "In truth, I am hungry."

The call was given and soon the food was served, and conversation turned to an exchange of histories between Laurie and Roald. Roald had listened raptly while Laurie recounted his adventures during the Riftwar, though he left out his involvement with the royal family and the news he was to wed the King's sister. The mercenary's mouth hung open. "I've never known a singer not given to overboasting, and you're the worst I've known, Laurie, but that tale is so outlandish I believe what you've said, it's incredible." Laurie looked stung. "Overboast? Me?"

While they ate, the innkeeper came over and said to Laurie, "I see you to be a singer." Laurie had brought along his lute, a nearly instinctive habit. "Will you honour this house with your songs?"

Arutha looked ready to object, but Laurie said, "Of

course." To Arutha he said, "We can leave later, Arthur, in Yabon, even when a singer pays for his meals, it is expected he will sing when asked. I build accounts. If I pass this way, I can sing and eat even if I have no money."

He crossed to a dais in the corner near the front door to the inn and sat upon a stool. He tuned his lute until the pitch of each string was correct, then began his song. It was a common tune, sung in all parts of the Kingdom and known by all who sang in alehouses and inns. It was a favourite of those who listened. The melody was pleasant, but the words were mawkish.

Arutha shook his head. "That's awful."

The others laughed. "True," said Roald, "but they like it," indicating the crowd.

Jimmy said, "Laurie plays what is popular, not always what is good. That way he eats."

Laurie finished to a loud round of applause and began another song. It was a bright, ribald charity, sung by sailors throughout the Bitter Sea, telling of a drunken seaman's encounter with a mermaid. A group of sailors just off a ship set up a clapping accompaniment to the song, and one took out a simple wooden pipe and played a clever countermelody. As the rowdy mood of the room increased, Laurie slipped into another bawdy charity regarding what occupies the captain's wife while her husband is out to sea. The sailors cheered at this, and the ONE with the pipe danced before the bar while he played. As the festive feeling in the room increased, the front door opened and three men entered. Jimmy watched them as they slowly made their way through the room and said, 'Uh oh, trouble.'

Martin looked to where Jimmy was watching. "You know them?"

"no, but I recognize the type. It's the big one in front that'll start it."

the;~~ man in question was the obvious leader of the group. He was a tall, "red-bearded fighter, a barrel-chested mercenary who had let most of his powerful frame run to fat. He wore two dirks but was otherwise unarmed. His leather jerkin barely closed over his gut. The two behind him looked like fighting men. One was armed with a variety of knives, varying from a tiny stiletto to a long dagger. The other wore a long hunting knife at his belt. The red-bearded man led his companions towards Arutha's table, speaking rudely as he pushed all aside who blocked his way. His manner wasn't entirely unfriendly, for he exchanged loud, coarse jokes with several men in the inn who obviously knew him. Soon all three stood before Arutha's table. Looking at the four seated there, the red-bearded man let a grin spread slowly across his face. 'You sit at my table.' His accent betrayed him as being from one of the southern Free Cities. He leant forward, fists on the table between the plates of food, and said, "You are strangers. I forgive you." Jimmy's mouth dropped open and he instinctively pulled away, for the man's breath betrayed a day already spent drinking and teeth long gone to rot. 'if you were Ylithmen, you'd know when Longly is in town, every night he sits at this table in the Northerner. Leave now, and I won't kill you dead.' With that he threw back his head and laughed. Jimmy was the first on his feet, saying, 'We didn't

know, sir.' He smiled weakly as the others exchanged glances. Arutha indicated he wished to quit the table and

avoid trouble. Jimmy made a show of being scared to death of the fat fighter. 'We'll find another table.'

The man called Longly grabbed Jimmy's left arm above the elbow. "This is pretty boy, no?' He laughed and looked at his companions. 'Or maybe it's girl, dressed like boy, he's so pretty.' He laughed again, then looked at Roald. "This boy your friend? Or is he pet?'

Arutha reached across the table and put his hand upon the man's arm. 'Let the boy go.'

Jimmy's eyes rolled heavenwards as he said, "I wish you hadn't said that.' Longly swung a backhanded blow at Arutha with his

hand, knocking the Prince backwards.

Roald and Martin exchanged resigned looks as Jimmy quickly raised his right leg so he could reach the dirk in his right boot top. Before anyone could move, Jimmy had the point of the dirk placed firmly in Longly's ribs. "I think you'd better find another table, friend.'

The huge man looked down at the thief, who barely reached his chin, then at the dagger. With a roaring laugh, he said, "Little fellow, you are very funny.' His free hand shot out and gripped Jimmy's wrist with unexpected speed. With slight effort, he forced the dirk away.

Jimmy's face became beaded with sweat as he struggled to escape the vicelike grip of the red-bearded man. In the corner Laurie sang on, ignorant of what was occurring at his friends' table. Others nearby, used to the activities of a seaport inn, were making room for impending trouble. Arutha sat on the floor, still groggy from the blow, then reached down and loosened his rapier in his scabbard. Roald nodded to Martin and both slowly stood, making a show of not pulling weapons. Roald said, 'Look, friend, we mean no harm. Had we known this to be your usual table, we'd have stayed clear. We'll find another. Let the boy go.

The man threw back his head and laughed. gila! I think I keep him. I know fat Quegan trader give me a hundred gold for a boy so pretty.' With a sudden scowl he looked about the table, then his gaze locked on Roald. "you go. The boy will say he's sorry for poking Longly in ribs, then maybe I let him go. Or maybe to fat Quegan he goes. '

Arutha slowly rose. It was difficult to know if Longly was seriously intending trouble, but after being struck, Arutha was not about to give the man the benefit of the doubt. The locals obviously knew Longly, and if he was intending some simple brawling and Arutha was first to pull steel, he could bring down their wrath. The fat man's two companions looked on cautiously.

Roald exchanged another glance with Martin and raised his flagon as if to finish his ale. With a sudden jerk he

tossed the contents of the mug into Longly's face, then backhanded the knife bearer in the side of the head with the pewter ale jack. The slender man's eyes rolled upwards as he slumped to the floor. The third man was distracted by Roald's sudden move and didn't see Martin's fist as the Duke unloaded a thundering blow, knocking Longly's companion backwards over another table. With the sudden action, more prudent customers began a quick exit from the inn. Laurie stopped playing and stood up on the dais to see what the problem was.

One of the barmen, not interested in who was responsible for trouble, sprang over the bar and landed atop the nearest combatant, who happened to be Martin. Longly held fast to Jimmy's wrist, wiping ale from his own face. Laurie carefully put down his lute and with a running jump leapt from the dais to a tabletop and vaulted onto Longly's back. Wrapping his arms around the large man's throat, he began choking him. Longly rocked forward under the impact, then regained his balance while Laurie clung to him. Ignoring the singer, he looked at Roald, who was ready to fight. 'You should not have thrown ale on Longly. Now I'm mad.'

Jimmy's face was turning white from the pain of the large man's grip. Laurie said, "Somebody help me. This giant's got a tree trunk for a neck!"

Arutha sprang to his right just as Roald struck Longly in the face. The large man blinked, then, with an insolent toss, threw Jimmy into Roald, knocking the mercenary into Arutha. All three went down in a heap. With his other hand he reached back over his shoulder and grabbed Laurie by the tunic. He flipped the singer overhead, tumbling him over the table. The table leg nearest Jimmy collapsed and Laurie rolled off into Roald and Arutha as they struggled to rise.

Martin had been grappling with the barman and finished off the encounter by tossing him back over the bar. He then reached out and seized Longly by the shoulder, turning him. The red-bearded man's eyes seemed to light at finding an opponent worthy of his mettle. At four inches over six feet, Martin was taller, though giving up pounds to Longly in bulk. Longly's voice sounded in a gleeful shout as he reached out and grabbed at Martin. Instantly they were in a wrestlers' hold, each with his hand around the back of the other's neck, opposite hand holding the other's wrist. For a long moment they swayed, then moved slightly as each sought a better advantage for a throw.

Laurie sat up, shaking his head. 'it's not human.'

Suddenly he realized he was sitting on Roald and Arutha and began disentangling himself.

Jimmy got to his feet, wobbling as he stood. Laurie looked up at the boy as Arutha stood up. 'What were

you trying to accomplish by pulling that dirk?' Laurie asked the thief. 'Get us killed?'

Jimmy looked angrily to where the two big men struggled for advantage. "Nobody talks about me that way. I'm no fop's delight.'

Laurie said, 'Don't take things so personally.' He started to rise. 'He just wants to play.' Laurie's knees buckled and he had to grab Jimmy to keep his feet. 'I think. '

Longly was giving out a strange assortment of grunts as he strove against Martin, while the Duke remained silent. Martin leaned forward, countering Longly's larger bulk with greater height. What had started as a possible bloodletting had settled into a passably friendly wrestling contest, albeit a rough one. Longly suddenly pulled back, but Martin simply followed the move, releasing his hold on Longly's neck but holding on to his wrist. In a single move he was behind the heavy man, holding Longly's arm in a painful position behind his head. The fat man grimaced as Martin put pressure on the hold, slowly

forcing him to his knees.

Laurie helped Roled to his feet as the mercenary shook his head, trying to gather his wits. When his vision had cleared, he studied the contest. He said to Laurie, 'That can't be very comfortable.'

Jimmy said, 'I expect that's why his face is turning purple.'

Roled started to speak to Jimmy, but something caused his head to turn suddenly towards Arutha. Jimmy and Laurie followed his gaze and their eyes widened.

Arutha, seeing all three staring at him, spun. A blackcloaked figure had managed to approach the table silently while the brawl was in progress. He stood stiffly behind Arutha, a dagger in his right hand poised to strike. The man's eyes stared forwards and his mouth moved silently.

Arutha's hand shot out, knocking aside the dagger, but his eyes studied the figure behind the black-clad man.

The Hadati warrior Jimmy and Martin had seen at the gate was poised, sword ready for another blow. He had struck silently at the assassin from behind, preventing a successful attack on the Prince. As the dying man collapsed, the Hadati quickly put up his slender sword and said, 'Come, there are others.'

Jimmy quickly examined the dead man and held up an ebony hawk on a chain. Arutha turned to Martin and said, "Martin, nighthawks! Finish it!"

Martin nodded to his brother, then, with a wrenching

movement that almost dislocated Longly's shoulder,

drove him to his knees. Longly looked upwards at Martin, then closed his eyes in resignation as the Duke raised his right hand. Halting his strike, Martin said, 'What use?' and shoved Longly forward. The large man fell face downwards on the floor and

then sat up, rubbing at his painful shoulder.

"Huh!" he laughed loudly. 'You come back sometime, big hunter You give Longly good thrashing, by gods!'

They raced out of the inn to the stables. The stableboy nearly fainted at the sight of all these armed men running towards him. Arutha said, 'Where are our horses?' The boy pointed towards the rear of the stable.

Martin said, 'They'll not stand up to a long run tonight.' Seeing other mounts, fresh and fed, Arutha said, 'Who owns these?'

The boy said, (My master, sir. But they are to be sold at auction next week.'

Arutha signalled for the others to saddle the fresh mounts. The boy's eyes teared as he said, "Please, sir, don't kill me.'

Arutha said, 'We'll not kill you, boy.'

The boy cowered away while the animals were saddled. The Hadati took a saddle from what was obviously the inn's supply of tack and made a sixth horse ready. Arutha mounted and tossed a pouch at the boy. "Here, tell your master to , sell our mounts and make up the difference from what's in the bag. Keep something for yourself.'

When all were ready, they rode from the stable, through the gates of the inn courtyard, and down a narrow street. If an alarm was going out, the city gates would soon be closed. A death in a bar brawl was a chancy thing. They could be pursued or not, depending upon which officer of the city watch was on duty that night, as much as for any other cause. Arutha decided to take no chances and they raced for the city's western gate.

' The city guards barely took notice when the six horsemen galloped past and disappeared down the highway towards the Free Cities. No alarm had been sounded. Down the road they flew, until the lights of Ylith were a distant glow in the night behind them. Then Arutha gave the signal to rein in.

He turned to the Hadati. 'We must speak.'

They dismounted and Martin led them to a small glade some distance from the road. As Jimmy tethered the horses, Arutha said "Who are you?"

"I am Baru, called the serpent-slayer," answered the hillman.

Laurie said, 'That is a name of power.' He explained to Arutha, "to earn his name, Baru killed a wyvern.'

Arutha looked at Martin, who inclined his head in

respect. 'To hunt dragonkind takes courage, strength of arm, and luck.' Wyverns were first cousins to dragons. The difference was mainly of size. To face one was to face rage and talons, speed and fangs, twelve feet high at the shoulder.

the haddati smiled for the first time. 'You are a hunter as your bow proclaims, Duke Martin.' At this Roald's eyes widened. "Mostly, it takes luck."

Roald stared at Martin. "Duke Martin." He then looked at Arutha. "Then you'd be . . ."

The Hadati said, 'He is Prince Arutha, son of Lord Borric and brother to our king. Did you not know?' Roald sat back silently shaking his head in an emphatic no. He looked at Laurie. this is the first time you've ever told only part of a story.'

Laurie said, 'it's a long one and even stranger than the other.' He said to Baru, "I see you are a northerner, but I do not know your clan.'

The Hadati fingered his plaid. 'This signifies I am of Ordwinson's family of the Iron Hills Clan. My people live near the place you city men call Lake of the Sky.'

"you Bloodquest?" He indicated the rolled scarf about his forehead. 'I quest. I am Wayfinder.'

"ah, Highness.' Roald said, 'He's a sort of holy man.'" Laurie said, 'A consecrated warrior. The scarf contains the names of all his ancestors. They can have no rest until he finishes his mission. He's taken a vow to complete the Bloodquest or die.'

'How do you know me?' asked Arutha.

'I saw you on your way to the peace conference with the Tsurani at the end of the war. There is little about those days any of my clan will forget.' He looked into the fire. 'When our King called to us, we came to fight the Tsurani, and for nine years and more we did so. They were strong foemen, willing to die for honour, men who understood their place on the Wheel. It was a worthy struggle.

"Then, in the spring of the last year of the war, the Tsurani came in great number. For three days and nights we fought, surrendering ground at great cost to the Tsurani. On the third day we who came from the Iron Hills were surrounded. Every fighting man of the Iron Hills Clan was numbered among those who stood at bay. To a man we should have died, save that Lord Borric saw us imperilled. Had not your father sortied to save us, our names would be but whispers upon yesterday's wind.'

Arutha recalled that Lyam's letter about his father's death had mentioned Hadati. "What has my father's death to do with me?"

Baru shrugged. 'I don't know. I was seeking knowledge

at the gate. Many pass there, and I was asking questions to aid my quest. Then I saw you pass. I thought it would be interesting to discover why the Prince of Krondor would enter one of his own cities as a common fighter. It would help pass the time while I sought information.

Then the assassin came, and I couldn't stand idly by and watch him slaughter you. Your father saved the manhood of my people. I saved your life. Perhaps that pays a debt in part. Who can know how the Wheel turns?'

Arutha said, 'At the inn you said there were others?'

'The man who tried to kill you followed you into the inn, watched you for a moment, then returned outside. There he spoke to a street boy, giving him money, and the boy ran off. He saw the three who fought with you and stopped them before they could pass. I heard nothing that was said, but he pointed to the inn and the three entered.'

Arutha said, 'Then the fight was staged.'

Jimmy, who had finished with the horses, said, 'More likely he knew longly's temper and made sure he knew some strangers were at his usual table, in case they were heading somewhere else and might miss us.'

Laurie said, "He might have wanted to keep us busy until others arrived, then saw what he thought was too good a chance to miss."

Arutha said, "Had you not been there, Baru, it would have been too good a chance to miss.'

The Hadati took this as thanks and said, "There is no debt. As I said, it may be I who am paying off a debt.'

Roald said, 'Well then, I guess you've sorted everything out. I'll be off for Ylith.'

Arutha exchanged glances with Laurie. The minstrel said, 'Roald, old friend, I think you should change your plans.

"What?"

"Well, should you have been noticed with the prince which seems likely, as there were thirty or forty people in the inn when the brawl broke out, those who are looking for him may decide to ask you where we're bound.'

With false bravado Roald said, 'Just let them try.'

Martin said, 'We'd rather not. They can be determined.

I've had dealings with moredhel before, and they lack Rold's eyes widened. "the Brotherhood of the Dark path?"

Martin nodded and Laurie said, 'Besides, you're presently at liberty.'

"Which is how I plan to stay.'

Arutha tried a sterner stand. "You'd say no to your Prince?"

"No disrespect intended, Highness, but I'm a free man not in your service and I've broken no laws. You have no authority over me.'

'Look,' said Laurie, "there's a likelihood these assassins



are going to look hard for anyone seen with us. And even though you're as tough a boot as I've known, I've seen what they can do and I'd not risk being taken alone by them.' Roald's resolve seemed unshaken.

Martin said, 'We could certainly find some reward for service.'

Roald, visibly brightening, said, "How much?"

Arutha replied, 'Stay until we complete' our quest and I'll pay you . . . a hundred golden sovereigns.'

Without hesitation Roald said, 'Done!' it was easily four months' wages for even a seasoned caravan guard.

Arutha then looked at Baru. 'You spoke of needing information. Can we aid your Bloodquest?'

'Perhaps. I seek to find one of those you know as the Brotherhood of the Dark Path.'

Martin raised an eyebrow at Arutha. 'What have you to do with the moredhel?'

'I seek a large moredhel of the Yabon hills, who wears a topknot, so' - he pantomimed a horsetail of hair - 'and three scars upon each cheek. I have been told he has come to the south on some black mission. I had hoped to hear of him from travellers, for one like that will stand out among the moredhel of the south.'

Arutha said, 'if he has no tongue, then he attacked us on our way to Sarth.'

'That is him,' said Baru. 'The tongueless one is called Nurad. He is a chieftain of the Clan Raven moredhel, blood enemies of my people since the dawn of time. even his own people fear him. The scars upon his face speak of pacts with dark powers, though little beyond that is known. He has not been seen in years, since before the Riftwar when moredhel moss-troopers raided across the hill borders of Yabon. "He is the cause of the Bloodquest. He was seen again two months ago when he led a band of black-armoured warriors past one of our villages. For no good reason he paused long enough to destroy the village, burning every building and killing everyone there except the herdsboy who described him to me. It was my village.' With an almost resigned sigh he said, 'if he was near Sarth, then there I must go next. This moredhel has lived too long.'

Arutha nodded to Laurie, who said, 'Actually, Baru, if you stay with us, he'll most likely come looking for you.'

Baru looked quizzically at the Prince, and Arutha told him of Murmandamus and his servants and the quest for Anita's cure. When he had finished, the Hadati grinned and there was no humour in it. "Then I shall take service with you, Highness, if you will accept me, for fate has thrown us together. You are hunted by my enemy and I will have his head before he can have yours.'

'Good,' said Arutha. "You will be welcome, for we follow a dangerous road.'

Martin stiffened, and in almost the same instant Baru was coming to his feet, moving towards the trees behind the Duke. Martin signalled for silence, and before the

others could move, he vanished into the trees, a step behind the hillman. The others began to move until Arutha motioned for them to hold. As they stood motionless in the dark, they heard what had alerted Martin and the Hadati. Echoing through the night was the sound of riders coming down the road from Ylith.

Long minutes passed, then the sound of hoofbeats passed, heading southwest. A few more minutes after, Martin and Baru reappeared. Martin whispered, "riders, a dozen or more, moving down the road as if there were demons coming behind."

"Black armour?" asked Arutha.

Martin said, "No, these were human, and hard to see in the dark, but I judge them a rough crew."

"The Nighthawks could have hired extra bashers if they needed. Ylith's that sort of town," Laurie said.

Jimmy agreed. "Maybe only one or two were Nighthawks, but hired knives kill as quickly as any others."

Baru said, "They head towards the Free Cities."

"They'll be back," said Roald. Arutha turned to look at the mercenary in the gloom, barely seeing his face in the faint moonlight. "Your Baron Talanque has a new customs shed five miles down the road. My caravan passed it this afternoon. Seems there's been some new smuggling from Natel of late. They'll find out from the guards no-one passed this night, and they'll be back."

"then," said Arutha, "we must be away. The question is how we reach Elvandar. I planned on travelling the road North to Yabon, then going west."

Roald said, "From Ylith north you'll meet some who know you from the war, Highness. Especially around LaMut. Had I any wits about me, I'd have figured it out after a while."

"Then which way?" asked the Prince.

Martin said, "We could head straight west from here, take the South Pass, and run the Grey Towers along the western face through the GreenHeart. It's dangerous, But . . ."

Arutha said, "But goblins and trolls are known enemies. it is how we shall travel. Now let's be off."

They mounted and moved out, Martin in the lead.

Slowly they wended their way through the dark and silent forests, heading west.

Arutha hid his anger, forcing it down within.

The uneventful trip from Sarth to Ylith had

lulled him, making him forget for a while what dangers existed. But the ambush at the in

and the pursuing riders had turned his awareness back to the dangers.

Murmandamus and his agents might have been denied their magic means of finding him, but they still had a net out, one that had nearly caught him.

Jimmy rode last in line, and he watched behind for a while, hoping not to see signs of followers. Soon sight of the road was lost in the darkness, and the boy returned his attention to Roald's and Laurie's backs, the only things he could see before him.

13

Stardock

The wind whipped the water to white foam.

Gardan looked at the distant shore of Stardock, wishing he could ride to the academy instead of trusting fate to keep a barge right side up. Still, it was on an island. He had endured sea voyages before, but despite a lifetime living in a seaport he hated travelling over water, though he would never openly admit as much.

They had left Krondor by ship, travelling down the coast until they entered the narrows between the Bitter Sea and the Sea of Dreams, which was more of a giant saltwater lake than a true sea. At Shamata they had commandeered horses and followed the river Dawlin to its source, the Great Star Lake. Now they stood waiting for the barge to put in. It was poled by two men in simple tunics and trousers, local peasants by the look of them. In a moment Gardan, Brother Dominic, Kasumi, and six Tsurani guards would step aboard and be poled to Stardock Island, almost a mile away. Gardan shivered in the unseasonably cool air. It was

spring, but the late afternoon air had none of the warmth expected at this time of year. 'I'm the fugitive from a hot land, Captain,' said Kasumi with a chuckle.

Gardan's voice had little humour in it as he replied, 'No, it is cold here, but there's something else. I've felt nothing but dark foreboding since leaving the Prince.' Brother Dominic said nothing, but his expression showed he shared the feeling.

, Kasumi nodded. He had stayed in Krondor to guard the King, and when Arutha's messages arrived he had 'accepted Lyam's charge to accompany Gardan and the Ishopian monk to ' Stardock. Besides his desire to visit Pug again, there had been something in Lyam's orders that made him believe the King counted the monk's safe arrival at Stardock vital.

The barge put in to shore and one of the two bargemen stepped ashore. 'We'll have to make two trips to carry the horses sir,' he said.

Kasumi, who was senior, said, 'That will be fine.' He indicated five of his men and said, 'These will go first, we will follow.'

Gardan said nothing about going second, he had no

desire to rush the coming ordeal. The five Tsurani led their animals aboard and took up position silently. Whatever they might think about journeying on the wallowing barge, they maintained their stoic demeanour.

The barge put out, and Gardan watched quietly. Save for faint signs of activity on the far island, the southern shore of the Great Star Lake was deserted. Why, wondered Gardan, would anyone choose to live in such isolation? Legend had it a star fell from the sky, creating the lake. But whatever the lake's origins, no community had ever arisen upon its shores.

The lone remaining Tsurani guard said something in his own language to Kasumi, pointing to the northeast. Kasumi looked where the man pointed.

Gardan and Dominic looked as well. In the distance, close to the horizon and coming before the approaching night, several winged figures could be seen gliding swiftly towards them. 'What are they?' asked Kasumi. 'Those are the biggest birds I've seen on your world so far. They appear to be nearly man-sized.'

Gardan squinted. Suddenly Dominic shouted, 'Ishap's grace! everyone back to shore.'

The bargemen looked back from where they were. Making slow, steady progress. Seeing Gardan and the others draw weapons, they quickly pushed back for land. The approaching figures could now be seen as they raced towards the party on shore. One of the boatmen cried out in fear and prayed to Dala for protection.

The nude creatures were grotesquely human-shaped, male, with blue skins and powerfully muscled torsos. Shoulder and chest muscles flexed as giant batlike wings beat the air. Their heads resembled those of hairless monkeys, and each waved a long, prehensile tail. Gardan counted: there were an even dozen of them. With impossibly high shrieks, they dived straight at the party on shore. As his horse bolted, Gardan lunged to one side, barely

avoiding the outstretched claws of one of the creatures. A scream sounded behind, and Gardan glimpsed one of the bargemen being carried aloft by a creature. It hovered for an instant with a powerful beat of its wings, holding the man by the neck. With a contemptuous cry it ripped out the bargeman's throat and dropped him. In a spray of blood, the man fell to the water.

Gardan struck out at one of the creatures, which sought to grab him in the same manner. The blade struck it squarely in the face, but the creature only withdrew with a back beat of its wings. There was no apparent mark upon it where the sword had struck. It grimaced, shook its head, then launched another attack. Gardan fell back, focusing his entire concentration on the creature's outstretched

hands. Very humanlike fingers ending in long talons raked across the steel of his blade as he parried. The captain wished his horse had stood long enough for him to retrieve his shield.

"What manner of beings are these?' Kasumi shouted as

the barge got close enough for the five Tsurani to leap for the shore.

Dominic's voice could be heard somewhere behind.

'They are elemental creatures, fashioned by black arts. Our weapons have no effect.'

The Tsurani seemed unperturbed despite that fact, attacking the creatures as they would any enemy, with no hesitation. While the blows received did no damage to the creatures, they obviously inflicted pain, for the Tsurani's onslaught caused the creatures to withdraw and hover for a moment.

Gardan looked and found Kasumi and Dominic close by. They both had shields and stood at the ready. Then the creatures were on them again. A soldier screamed, and Gardan caught a glimpse of a Tsurani falling nearby. Gardan saw Kasumi avoid the rush of two of the creatures, using sword, shield, and agility to good advantage.

But the captain knew there was no hope of survival, for it would be only a matter of time before they tired and slowed. The creatures showed no sign of fatigue and were attacking with as much fury as when they arrived.

Dominic lashed out with his mace, and a creature warbled a high-pitched note of pain. If weapons could not cut the magically constructed hide, then at least they could break bones. The creature fluttered in a circle, trying desperately to stay aloft, but slowly it approached the ground. From the way one wing lamely flapped, it was obvious Dominic had broken its shoulder.

Gardan dodged another attack and danced to one side. Behind the two creatures attacking him he saw the wounded one touch the ground. As soon as its feet made contact with the earth, the creature emitted an earsplitting howl of pain and burst into a shower of sparkling energies. With a flash, near-blinding in the evening gloom, it vanished, leaving only a smoking patch on the ground. Dominic shouted, 'They are elementals of the air! They cannot abide the touch of earth!'

Gardan swung a mighty overhand blow at the creature on his right. The force of the blow drove the creature downwards. It made the briefest contact with the earth, but that was enough. Like the other, it exploded into sparks. In panic, it reached out a hand and gripped the trailing tail of the creature beside it, as if trying to pull itself away from the destruction below. The sparking energy travelled up the tail of the second creature and it,

too, was consumed.

Kasumi whirled about and saw that three of his six men lay dead. The creatures now numbered nine, and they swarmed the remaining fighters, though there was now an element of caution in their approach. One swooped down towards Dominic, who braced for the attack. Instead of reaching out for the monk, the elemental beat backwards against the air, buffeting the cleric, seeking to knock him down. Gardan raced up behind the creature, ducking to avoid claws reaching for him. He lunged forwards, barely keeping sword in hand, and threw his arms about the dangling legs of the creature facing Dominic. He hugged them close, his face buried against the naked thigh of the thing. His stomach churned at the stench from the elemental's body, the odour of things long dead and best buried. His unexpected weight pulled the thing downwards. It shrieked and beat its wings furiously, but it was off balance and Gardan pulled it to the ground. Like the others, it burst into sparks. Gardan rolled away, feeling pain erupt along his arms and chest, where he had gripped the creature when it exploded: he had been burned in the process of destroying it. He ignored the pain and felt a growing hope. Those on the shore numbered seven - Gardan, Kasumi, Dominic, three soldiers, and a boatman wielding a pole and the creatures were now only eight.

For a moment the attacking elementals chose to circle overhead, out of reach of the surviving soldiers' weapons. As they began to peel off for a swooping attack, a shimmering began a short distance down the beach from the defenders. Gardan prayed to Tith, god of soldiers, that it wasn't the arrival of another attacker. One more foe would surely tip the balance and overwhelm them. With a flickering of light a man appeared upon the beach, dressed in simple black tunic and trousers. Gardan and Kasumi at once recognized Pug and shouted a warning to him. The magician calmly surveyed the situation. One creature, seeing an unarmed opponent, howled with maniacal glee and dived for him.

Pug stood his ground, showing no defence. The diving creature reached a point less than ten feet from him, then crashed into an invisible barrier. As if it had struck a stone wall, the creature crumpled to the ground. It vanished in another blinding flash.

Shrieks of panic sounded overhead, as the remaining creatures now understood that here was a foe beyond their powers to harm. As one, the seven remaining creatures turned and began a headlong flight northwards. Pug waved his hands and suddenly a blue fire danced upon his upraised palms. He cast it after the fleeing creatures. The sphere of blue fire sped after the elementals

and caught up with them as they winged furiously over the water. Like a cloud of pulsating light, it enveloped them. Strangled cries of pain could be heard as the elementals contorted in midair and fell twitching into the lake. As each touched the surface of the water, it erupted into green flame, consumed as it vanished under the rippling surface of the lake.

Gardan watched Pug as he approached the nearly exhausted soldiers. There was something unusually sombre in Pug's expression and his gaze held a hint of power Gardan had never seen before. Abruptly, Pug's expression changed as he relaxed. His face now looked young, boyish in spite of his nearly twenty-six years of age. With a sudden smile he said, "Welcome to Stardock, gentlemen.

A warm fire filled the room with a cosy glow. Gardan and Dominic rested in large chairs set before the fireplace, while Kasumi sat on cushions, Tsurani fashion. Kulgan dressed the captain's burns, fussing like a mother over her idiot child. The two had known each other for years at Crydee, well enough for Kulgan to take a rough tone with the captain. "How you could be foolish enough to grab on to one of those things - anyone knows that contact with an elementally dependent creature when it returns to a primal state involves the release of energies, mostly heat and light.'

Gardan, tired of being scolded, said, "Well, I didn't know. Kasumi, did you know? Dominic?'

Kasumi sat laughing as Dominic said, "As a matter of fact, I did know.'

'You are no help at all, priest,' muttered the captain.

"Kulgan, if you are done, can we eat? I've been smelling that hot food for nearly an hour and it's close to making me go mad.'

Pug laughed, leaning against the wall next to the hearth. "Captain, it's more like ten minutes.'

They were sitting in a room in the first floor of a large building under construction. Kasumi said, "I am glad the King permitted me to visit your academy, Pug.'

'And I as well,' said Brother Dominic. "While we at Sarth appreciate those copies of works you've forwarded to us so far, we are still vague about what your plans are. We seek to know more.'

Pug said, 'I am pleased to host any who come with the love of learning, Brother Dominic. Perhaps someday we may claim repayment of our slight hospitality and visit your fabled library.'

Kulgan's head came around at that. "I would be pleased

to claim that right, friend Dominic.'

"Anytime you call, you'll be welcome.",' answered the monk.

'Watch this one,' said Gardan with a tilt of his head towards Kulgan. "Lose him in those underground vaults and you'll never find him. He's as passionate for books as a bear for honey.'

A striking woman with dark hair and large, dark eyes entered the room, followed by two servants. All carried platters with food, and as she placed hers upon the long table at the other end of the room from where the men were gathered, she said, 'Please, it is time for supper.'

Pug said, 'Brother Dominic, this is my wife, Katala.'

The monk nodded deferentially and said, 'My lady.'

She smiled at him. "Please, Katala. We tend to the informal here.'

The monk again inclined his head as he came to the indicated chair. He turned at the sound of a door opening, and for the first time since the captain had met him, the monk's composure cracked. William came hurrying into the room, the green-scaled form of Fantus behind.

'Ishap's mercy! Is that a firedrake?'

William ran to where his father stood and hugged him, eyeing the newcomers cautiously. Kulgan said, 'This is Fantus, lord of this estate. The rest of us live here by his sufferance, though he suffers William's company best.'

The drake's gaze shifted to Kulgan for a moment as if he agreed totally.. Then his large red eyes returned to contemplating the table and what lay upon it.

Pug said, 'William, say hello to Kasumi.'

William bowed his head slightly, smiling. He spoke in the Tsurani tongue, and Kasumi answered, laughing. Dominic looked interested. Pug said, 'My son is fluent in both the King's Tongue and the tsurani language. My wife and I keep him practising both, for many of my works are in the Tsurani language, That is one of the problems I have in bringing the art of the Greater Path to Midkemia. Much of what I do is the result of how I think, and I think magic in the Tsurani language. William's going to be a great help someday, aiding me in discovering ways to do magic in the King's Tongue so I can teach those who live here.'

Katala said, 'Gentlemen, the food grows cold.'

'And my wife does not permit talking of magic at this table,' said Pug. Kulgan snorted at this, and Katala said, 'If I did, these two would hardly get a mouthful.'

Gardan moved with alacrity, despite his discomfort saying, "I don't have to be warned more than once.' He sat down and immediately one of the servants began filling his platter.

Dinner proceeded pleasantly, with talk of small things.



As if the terrors of the day had vanished with the night, all mention of the grim events that had brought Gardan, Dominic, and Kasumi to Stardock were ignored. Nothing about Arutha's quest, the threat of Murmandamus, or the portent of the abbey was said. For a short time no discord existed. For a brief hour, the world was a pleasant place with old friends, and new guests, enjoying one another's company.

Then William was making his good-nights. Dominic was struck by the resemblance between boy and mother, though his manner of moving and speaking was in open imitation of his father. Fantus had been fed from William's plate and padded out of the room behind him.

'I still can hardly credit my senses where that drake is concerned,' said Dominic after they had left.

'He's been Kulgan's pet as long as I can remember,' said Gardan.

Kulgan, who was lighting a pipe, said, "Ha~ No longer. That boy and Fantus have been inseparable since the day they met.'

Katala said, 'There is something beyond the ordinary with those two. At times I think they understand each other.'

Dominic said, 'Lady Katala, there is little about this place which is not beyond the ordinary. This gathering together of magicians, this construction, that is all extraordinary.'

Pug rose and led the others to the chairs near the fire. cBut understand that upon Kelewan, when I studied at the Assembly, what you see aborning here was ancient and established. The brotherhood of magicians was an accepted fact, as was the common sharing of knowledge.'

Kulgan puffed contentedly upon his pipe. cWhich is as it should be.'

Pug said, "We can discuss the rise of the academy Stardock tomorrow, when I can show you our community. I'll read the messages from Arutha and the Abbot tonight. I know all that led up to Arutha's leaving Krondor, Gardan. What occurred between there and' Sarth?'

The captain, who had been feeling drowsy, forced himself alert and quickly told of the events from Krondor to Sarth. Brother Dominic remained silent, since the captain forgot nothing of significance. Then it was the monk's turn, as he explained what he knew of the attack upon the abbey. When he had finished, Pug and Kulgan asked several questions but withheld comment.

Pug said, 'The news you carry is cause for the deepest concern. Still, the hour is late, and I think there are others upon this island who should be consulted. I suggest we show these tired and sore gentlemen to their rooms and begin discussions in earnest tomorrow.'

Gardan, who could feel a yawn beginning, stifled it and nodded. Kasumi, Brother Dominic, and the captain were escorted from the room by Kulgan, who bade the others good night.

Pug left the fireside and crossed to a window, where he stood watching the little moon's light reflecting off the water as it peeked through the cloud cover. Katala came up behind her husband and her arms went around his waist.

'You are troubled by this news, husband.' It was a statement, not a question.

'As always, you know my mind.' He turned within the circle of her arms and drew her closer, smelling the sweetness of her hair as he kissed her cheek. "I had hoped we would live out our lives with the building of this academy and the raising of children our only concerns.'

She smiled up at him, dark eyes mirroring the unending love she felt for her man. 'Among the Thuril we have a saying.'"Life is problems. Living is solving problems."

He smiled at this. She said, "Still, it is true. What do you think of the news Kasumi and the others brought?'

"I do not know.' He stroked her brown hair. "Lately I have felt a growing gnawing feeling inside. I have thought it simply worry over the progress we make here in building the academy, but it is more than that. My nights have been filled with dreams.'

'I know, Pug. I have seen you struggle in your sleep. You have yet to speak to me of them.'

He looked at her. "I had no wish to trouble you, love. I thought them mere ghosts of memories from the times of trouble. But now I . . . I am not sure. One returns with frequency, coming more often lately. A voice in a dark place cries out to me. It seeks my aid, begs for help.'

She said nothing, for she knew her husband and would wait until he was ready to share his feelings. Finally he said, 'I know the voice, Katala. I have heard it before, when the time of troubles was full upon us at its most dreadful moment, when the outcome of the Riftwar hung in the balance, when the fate of two worlds rested upon my shoulders. It's Macros. It's his voice I hear.'

Katala shivered and hugged her husband close. The name of Macros the Black, whose library served as the seed for this growing academy of magic, was one she knew well. Macros was the mysterious sorcerer, neither of the Greater Path like Pug, nor of the Lesser Path like Kulgan, but something else. He had lived long enough to seem eternal and he could read the future. He had always had a hand in the conduct of the Riftwar, playing some cosmic game with human lives for stakes only he understood. He had rid Midkemia of the rift, the mapc bridge

between her own homeworld and her new one. She nestled closer to Pug, her head on his chest. Most of all, she knew why Pug was troubled. Macros was dead.

Gardan, Kasumi, and Dominic stood at ground level admiring the work proceeding above. Workers contracted in Shamata were laying course after course of stone, building up the high walls of the academy. Pug and Kulgan stood nearby, inspecting the newest plans submitted by the Masterbuilder in charge of construction.

Kulgan motioned for the newcomers to join them. "This is all vital to us, so you will please indulge us a bit, I trust," said the stout mage. "We have been at work for only a few months and we are anxious to see the work uninterrupted."

Gardan said, "This building will be immense."

"Twenty-five storeys tall, with several higher towers for observing the heavens."

Dominic said, "That is incredible. Such a building could house thousands."

Kulgan's blue eyes sparkled merrily. "From what Pug has told me, it is but a part of what he knew in the City of Magicians on the other world. There an entire city has grown together into a single gigantic edifice. When we have completed our work, years from now, we shall have only one-twentieth part of that, or less. Still, there is room to grow, if needs be. Someday, perhaps, the academy may cover this entire island of Stardock."

The Masterbuilder left, and Pug said, "I am sorry for the interruption, but some decisions needed to be made. Come, let's continue the inspection."

Following the wall, they rounded a corner to come upon a group of buildings looking like nothing so much as a small village. Here they could see men and women in various manner of dress, Kingdom and Keshian, moving among the buildings. Several children played in a square at the centre of the village. One of them was William.

Dominic looked about and saw Fantus lying near a doorway in the sunlight, a short distance away. The children were frantically trying to kick a ball fashioned of rags bound in leather into a barrel. The game seemed devoid of rules of conduct or play.

Dominic laughed at the sight. "I used to play the same game on Sixthdays when I was a boy."

Pug smiled. "As did I. Much of what we plan has yet to be implemented, so for the present the children's duties are occasional things. They don't seem to mind."

"What is this place?" asked Dominic.

"For the time being, it is the home of our young community. The wing where Kulgan and my family have our rooms, as well as some instruction rooms, is the only

part of the academy ready for use. It was the first section completed, though construction still continues above on the upper floors. Those who travel to Stardock to learn and serve at the academy live there, until more quarters can be made ready in the main building.' He motioned for them to follow him into a large building that dominated the village. William left the game and tagged along beside his father. Pug placed his hand upon the boy's shoulder. "How are your studies today?"

The boy made a face. 'Not so good. I gave up today. Nothing works as it should.'

Pug's expression turned serious, but Kulgan gave William a playful push back towards the game. "Run along, boy. Worry not, your father was equally hardheaded when he was my student. It will come in time.'

pug half smiled. "Hardheaded?"

Kulgan said, "Perhaps "slow-witted" would be a better way to put it.'

Entering the door, Pug said, 'Until the day I die Kulgan will make sport of me.'

The building turned out to be a hollow shell. Its only purpose seemed to be to house a large table running the length of it. The only other feature of the room was a hearth. The high ceiling was supported by rafter beams, from which hung lanterns that gave off a cheery light. Pug pulled out a chair at the end of the table, signalling for the others to sit as well.

Dominic was pleased with the fire. Even if it was late spring, this day was chilly. He said, 'What of the women and children about?'

Kulgan withdrew his pipe from his belt and began to stuff the bowl with tabac. "The children are the sons and daughters of those who have come here. We have plans to organize a school ' for them. Pug has some strange notions about educating everyone in the Kingdom someday, though I don't see universal education becoming the vogue. The women are either the wives of magicians or magicians themselves, women commonly regarded as witches.'

Dominic appeared troubled. "Witches?"

Kulgan lit his pipe with a flame on the end of his finger and exhaled a cloud of smoke. 'What is in a name? They practise magic. For reasons I do not understand, men have at least been somewhat tolerated for practising magic in many places, while women have been driven from nearly every community where they are discovered to have power.'

Dominic said, 'But it is held that witches gain their powers by serving dark forces.'

Kulgan waved the notion aside. 'Nonsense. That is superstition, if you'll forgive my being blunt. The source

of their power is no more dark than your own, and their behaviour is usually a great deal kinder than that of some of the more enthusiastic, if misguided, servants of some temples.'

Dominic said, 'True, but you are speaking of a recognized member of a legitimate temple.'

Kulgan looked directly at Dominic. 'Forgive the observation, but in spite of the Ishapian reputation for a more worldly view than that of other orders, your remarks are profoundly provincial. So what if these poor wretches do not toil within a temple?

'If a woman serves in a temple she is holy, and if she comes to her power in a hut in the woods she is a witch? Even my old friend Father Tully wouldn't swallow that piece of dogmatic tripe. You are not speaking of any inherent question of good or evil, you're talking about who's got a better guild.'

Dominic smiled. 'You, then, seek to build a better guild?'

Kulgan blew out a cloud of smoke. 'In a sense, yes, though that is less the reason for what we do than is trying to codify as much magic lore as possible.'

Dominic said, "Forgive my harsh questions, but one of my charges was to determine the source of your motivation. The King is your powerful ally, and our temple was concerned that there might be some hidden purpose behind your activities. It was thought, as long as I was coming here . . . '

Pug finished, 'You might as well challenge what we do and see what we say?'

Kasumi said, 'As long as I have known Pug, he has acted with honour.'

Dominic went on, 'Had I a single doubt, I would have said nothing now. That your purposes are only the highest is not in doubt. Just . . . '

Pug and Kulgan both said, 'What?'

"It is clear you seek to establish a community of scholars, more than anything else. That, in and of itself, is laudable. But you will not always be here. Someday this academy could be a powerful tool in the wrong hands.'

Pug said, '(We are taking every precaution to avoid that pitfall, believe me.'

Dominic said, "I do.

Pug's expression changed, as if he had heard something.

'They are coming,' he said.

Kulgan watched with rapt attention. 'Gamina?' he asked in a whisper. '

pug nodded, and Kulgan made a satisfied "Ah" sound.

'The contact was better than ever. She grows in power each week.'

Pug explained to the others, 'I read the reports you brought last night and have summoned here one who I think may help. With him comes another.'

Kulgan said, 'The other is . . . one able to send thoughts and receive them with remarkable clarity. At present she is the only one we have found able to do so. Pug has told of a similar ability on Kelewan, used during his training, but it required preparation of the subject.'

Pug said, 'It is like the mind touch used by some priests, but there is no need for physical contact, or even proximity, it seems. Nor is there the attendant danger of being caught up in the mind of the one touched. Gamina is a rare talent.' Dominic was impressed. Pug continued, 'She touches the 'mind and it is as if she speaks. We have hopes of someday understanding this wild talent and learning a way to train others to it.'

Kulgan said, 'I hear them approaching.' He rose.

'Please, gentlemen, Gamina is something of a timid soul one who has undergone difficult times. Remember that and be gentle with her.'

Kulgan opened the door and two people entered. The man was ancient, with a few stray wisps of hair, like white smoke, falling to his shoulders. His hand was on the other's shoulder and he walked stooped over, showing some slight deformity under his red robe. From the milky orbs that stared blankly ahead it was obvious the old man was blind.

But it was the girl who commanded their attention.

She wore homespun and appeared about seven years old, a tiny thing who clutched at the hand upon her shoulder.

Her blue eyes were enormous, illuminating a pale face of delicate features. Her hair was almost as white as the old man's, holding only a hint of gold. What struck Dominic, Gardan, and Kasumi was an overwhelming feeling that this child was perhaps the most beautiful they had ever seen. Already they could see in those childish features the promise of a woman of unsurpassed beauty.

Kulgan guided the old man to a chair next to his own.

The girl did not sit, but chose to stand beside the man, both hands on his shoulder, fingers flexing nervously, as if she feared to lose contact with him. She looked at the three strangers with the expression of a cornered wild thing. She took no pains to disguise her distrust.

Pug said, 'This is Rogen.'

The blind man leant forward. 'whOm do I meet?' His face, despite the age it showed, was alive and smiling, uptilted as if to hear better. It was evident that he, unlike the girl, enjoyed the prospect of meeting newcomers.

Pug introduced the three men, who sat opposite Kulgan and Rogen. The 'blind man's smile broadened. 'I am pleased to meet you, worthy gentlemen.

Then Pug said, 'This is Gamina.'

Dominic and the others were startled when the girl's voice sounded in their heads. Hello.

The girl's mouth had not moved. She was motionless, her enormous blue eyes fixed upon them.

Gardan said, 'Did she speak?'

Kulgan answered, 'With her mind. She has no other power of speech.'

Rogen reached up to pat the girl's hands. 'Gamina was born with this gift, though she nearly drove her mother crazy with her silent crying.' The old man's face became solemn. 'Gamina's mother and father were stoned to death by the people of her village, for having birthed a demon. Poor, superstitious people they were. They feared to kill the baby, thinking she would revert to her "natural" form and slay them all, so they left her in the forest to die of exposure. She was not yet three years old.'

Gamina looked at the old man with penetrating eyes. He turned to face her, as if he could see her, and said, 'Yes, that is when I found you.'

To the others he said, 'I was living in the forest, in an abandoned hunter's lodge I had discovered. I also was driven from my home village, but that was years earlier. I foretold the death of the town miller and was blamed for it. I was branded a warlock.'

Pug said, 'Rogen has the power of second sight, perhaps to compensate for his blindness. He has been without sight since birth.'

Rogen smiled broadly and patted the girl's hands. 'We are alike, we two, in many ways. I had grown to fear what would become of the girl when I die.' He interrupted himself to speak to the girl, who had become agitated at his words. She stood shaking, her eyes welling up with tears. 'Hush,' he scolded gently. 'I will, too - everyone does. I hope not too soon, though,' he added with a chuckle. He returned to his narrative. 'We came from a village near Salador. When word reached us of this wondrous place, we started our journey. It took six months to walk here, mostly because I am so old. Now we have found people like ourselves, who view us as a source of knowledge, not a source of fear. We are home.'

Dominic shook his head, amazed that a man his age and a child had walked hundreds of miles. He was obviously moved. 'I am beginning to understand another part of what it is you do here. Are there many more like these two?'

Pug said, 'Not as many as I would like. Some of the more established magicians refuse to join us. Others fear us. They will not reveal their abilities. Others simply do not yet know we exist. But some, like Rogen, seek us out. We have nearly fifty practitioners of magic here.'

'That is a great many,' said Gardan.

Kasumi said, 'In the Assembly there were two thousand Great Ones.'

Pug nodded. 'We also had nearly that number who followed the Lesser Path. And of those who rose to the black robe, the sign of the Greater Magician, each was but one in five who began training, under conditions more rigorous than we are capable of here or would desire.'

Dominic looked at Pug. 'What of the others, those who failed their training?'

'They were killed,' Pug answered flatly.

Dominic judged it a topic Pug did not wish to pursue.

A flicker of fear crossed the girl's face and Rogen said,

'Hush, hush. No one will hurt you here. He was speaking of a faraway place. Someday you will be a great teacher.' The girl relaxed, and a faint flicker of pride in her expression could be seen. It was obvious she doted upon the old man.

Pug said, 'Rogen, there is something taking place that your powers may aid us in understanding. Will you help?'

'Is it that important?'

"I would not ask if it were not vital. Princess Anita lies in peril and Prince Arutha is at constant risk from some unkn'own enemy.'

The girl became worried, or at least that was how Gardan and Dominic read her expression. Rogen cocked his head, as if listening, then said, "I know it is dangerous, but we owe Pug a great deal. He and Kulgan are the only hope for people like ourselves.' Both men appeared embarrassed by this but said nothing. 'Besides, Arutha is the King's brother, and it was their father who gave us all this wonderful island to ~live on. How would people feel if they knew we could have helped but didn't?'

Pug spoke softly to Dominic. 'Rogen's second sight is different from any I've heard of. Your order is reputed to have some knowledge of prophecy.' Dominic nodded. "He sees . . . probabilities is the best way I can describe it. What may happen. It seems to require a great deal of his energies, and though he is tougher than he looks, he is still quite old. It is easier if only one person speaks to him, and as you have the best understanding of the nature of the magic that has occurred, I think it would be better for you to tell him all you know.' Dominic agreed. Pug said, 'If everyone else will please remain silent. '

Rogen reached across the table and took the cleric's hands. Dominic was ~surprised at the strength remaining in those withered old - fingers. While not able to foretell



himself, Dominic was ' familiar with the process as per-formed by those of his order. He cleared his mind, then began to tell his story from when Jimmy first ran foul of the Nighthawk upon ' the rooftop to when Arutha left Sarth. Rogen remained silent. Gamina did not move. When Dominic spoke of the prophecy naming Arutha "Bane of Darkness' the old man' shuddered and his lips moved silently.

The mood in the room became ominous as the monk spoke. Even the fire seemed to dim. Gardan found he was hugging himself.~ he sat.

When the monk halted, Rogen continued to clutch his hand, not allowing the other to pull away. His head was raised, neck arched slightly backwards, as if he were listening to something distant. His lips worked without sound for a while, then slowly words were forming, though so quietly they were not distinguishable. All at once he spoke clearly. , his voice firm. 'There is a . . . presence . . . a being\_ I see a city, a mighty bastion of towers and walls. Upon these walls stand proud men willing to defend it to the end.. Now . . . it's a city under siege. I see it overwhelmed, with its towers ablaze . . . It's a city being murdered. A great savage host runs in its streets as it falls. Those who fight are sorely pressed and withdraw to a keep. Those who rape and loot . . . all are not human. I see those of the Dark Path and their goblin servants. They roam the streets, their weapons dripping blood. I see strange ladders being raised to storm the keep, and strange bridges of light. Now it burns, all burns, all is in flames \_ . it is over.

There was a moment of silence, then Rogen continued.

"I see a host, gathered on a plain, with strange banners flapping. Black-armoured figures sit silently on horseback, showing twisted shapes on shields and tabards. Above stands a moredhel . . . ' The old man's eyes teared.

"He is . . . beautiful . . . He . . . is evil. He wears the mark of the dragon. He stands upon a hill while below him Armies march past singing battle songs. Great machines of war are pulled by miserable human slaves."

Then, there was silence. Then, "I see another city. Its image shifts and wavers, for its future is less certain. Its walls lie breached, and its streets are stained red. The sun hides its face behind grey clouds . . . and the city cries out in anguish. Men and women are chained in lines without end. They are . . . whipped by creatures who taunt '~ and torment them. They are being herded to a great square, where they face their conqueror. A throne is erected atop a mound . . . a mound of bodies. Upon it is the beautiful one, the evil one. At his side stands another, a black robe hides his features. Behind the both is another something. . . I cannot see it, but it is

real, it exists, it is . . . dark . . . it is insubstantial, without being, not truly there, but . . . it is also there. It touches The one on the throne.' Rogen tightly clutched Dominic's hands. ... "Wait . . . ' he said, then hesitated. His hands began to tremble, then in pitiful tones, nearly a sob, he cried, Oh gods of mercy! It can see me! It can see me! The old man's lips trembled, while Gamina clutched at his shoulder, eyes wide, holding him closely, terror written upon her little face. Suddenly Rogen's lips parted to emit a terrible groan, a sound of the purest agony and despair and his body went rigid. Without warning, a lance of fire, a stab of pure pain, erupted in the minds of all who sat in the room. Gamina screamed in silence. Gardan clutched at his head, nearly fainting from the white-hot flash of searing agony. Dominic's face went ashen and he reeled back in his chair under the onslaught of the cry as if struck a physical blow. Kasumi's eyes screwed closed as he fought to rise. Kulgan's pipe fell from slack lips as he clutched his temples. Pug staggered to his feet, using every shred of his magic power to erect some sort of mental barrier against the tearing in his mind. He pushed back the blackness that sought to overwhelm him, reaching out to touch the girl. 'Gamina,' he croaked. The girl's mental screaming continued unabated and she tore frantically at the old man's tunic, a mindless act, as if she sought somehow to snatch him back from whatever horror he faced. Her large eyes were wide and her voiceless hysterics nearly drove those around her to madness. Pug lunged forward and grabbed her shoulder. Gamina ignored the touch, continuing to scream for Rogen. Mustering his powers, Pug forced aside the terror and pain in the girl's projected thoughts for a brief moment. Gardan's head fell forward onto the table, as did Kasumi's. Kulgan lurched upright, then fell back into his chair, stunned. Besides Pug and Gamina, only Dominic had managed to retain consciousness. Something inside him had struggled to reach out to the girl, no matter how much he wished to retreat from the pain being visited upon him by her. The girl's primitive terror nearly brought Pug to his knees, but he forced himself on. He cast a spell, and the girl fell forward. At once the pain ceased. Pug caught her, but the effort drove him back and he staggered into his chair. He sat cradling the unconscious girl, stupefied by the onslaught. Dominic felt as if his head would burst but hung on to consciousness. The old man's body was still rigid, nearly bowed back with pain, his lips working feebly. Dominic

incanted a spell of healing, one used to cease pain. Finally Rogen went limp, seeming to collapse into his chair. But his face was still a mask of terror and pain, and he cried out in a hoarse whisper words the monk could not understand, before he lapsed into unconsciousness. Pug and the monk exchanged confused looks. Dominic felt blackness overtake him and, before he passed out, wondered why the magician suddenly looked so frightened.

Gardan paced the room where they had dined' the night before. Next to the fire, Kulgan said, "You'll wear a furrow in the stones of the floor if you don't sit down.' Kasumi rested quietly on a cushion beside the magician. Gardan lowered himself next to the Tsurani and said, "It's this infernal waiting.' Dominic and Pug, with the aid of some healers in the community, were tending to Rogen. The old man had lain near death since he had been carried from the meeting house. Gamina's mental scream 'had touched all within a mile of her, though striking those at a distance with less force. Still, several people near the building had been rendered senseless for a time. When the cries had stopped, those with their wits about them had rushed to see what had occurred. They had found all in the meeting house unconscious. Katala was soon on the scene and ordered them all carried to the quarters where she could oversee their care. The others had recovered in a few hours, but Rogen had not. The vision had begun in midmorning, and now it was after supper.

Gardan struck hand with fist and said, 'Damn. I was never meant for this sort of business. I ' am a soldier. These monsters of magic, these nameless powers . . . Oh for an enemy of flesh and blood!'

TOO well do I know what you can do to a flesh-and-blood enemy,' Kasumi said. Kulgan looked interested, and Kasumi said, "'In the early years of the war, the captain and I faced one another at the siege of Crydee. It wasn't until we were exchanging histories that I discovered he was second to Prince Arutha during the siege, or he that I led the assault.'

The door opened and a large man entered, removing a great cloak. He was bearded and weather-beaten in appearance, looking like a hunter or woodcutter. He smiled slightly and said, 'I go away for a few days and look who wanders in.'

Gardan's dark face broke into a 'broad smile and he rose, extending his hand. 'Meecham!'

They shook and the man called Meecham said, "Well met, Captain.' Kasumi followed suit, for Meecham was an old acquaintance. He was a franklin, a free man with

his own land in service to Kulgan, though he was more a friend to the magician than any sort of servant.

Kulgan said, "Any luck?"

The forester absently stroked 'the scar on his left cheek as he said, 'No. All fakes.'

,Kulgan said to the others, cWe heard of a travelling caravan of fortune-tellers and gypsies, camped a few days this side of Landreth. I sent Meecham to discover if any of them were true talents.'

"There was one,' said Meecham. 'Might have been what he seemed, but he quieted down when I told him where I was from. Maybe he'll show up on his own hook.' He looked around the room. 'All right, isn't anyone going to tell me what's going on here?'

As Kulgan finished recounting everything to Meecham the door opened and further conversation was interrupted.

William entered leading Gamina by the hand. The old man's ward looked even more pale than when Gardan had seen her the day before. She looked at Kulgan, Kasumi, and Gardan and her voice entered their minds. I am sorry I caused so much pain. I was frightened.

Kulgan slowly extended his arms, and the girl gingerly allowed him to gather her up onto his ample lap. With a gentle hug, he said, "It is all right, lass. We understand.'

The others smiled at the girl reassuringly and she seemed to relax. Fantus came padding into the room.

William threw him a quick look and said, 'Fantus is hungry.'

Meecham said, 'That beast was born hungry.'

No, came the thought. He said he was hungry. No one remembered to feed him today. I heard.

Kulgan gently held the little girl away from him so he could look at her. 'What do you mean?'

He told William he was hungry. Just now. I heard him.

Kulgan looked at William. 'William, can you hear Fantus?'

William looked at Kulgan with a curious expression.

'Of course. Can't you?'

They talk to each other all the time.

Kulgan's face became animated. 'This is wonderful! I had no idea. No wonder you two have been so close.

William, how long have you been able to speak to Fantus this way?'

The boy shrugged. 'Ever since I can remember. Fantus has always talked to me.'

'And you could hear them speak to each other?'

Gamina nodded. 'Can you speak to Fantus?'

No. But I can hear him when he talks to William. He thinks funny. It is hard.

Gardan was astonished by the conversation. He could hear Gamina's answers in his head, as if he were listening.

From observing the girl's private remarks to Rogen the day before, he realized that she obviously was able to speak with whomever she chose in a selective way. William turned towards the drake. 'All right.' he said in aggravated tones. He said to Kulgan, 'I'd better go to the kitchen and get him something. Can Gamina stay here?'

Kulgan gave the girl a gentle hug and she nestled deeply into his 'lap. 'Of course.'

William dashed from the room, and Fantus hurried after, the prospect of a meal motivating him to an atypical display of speed. When they were gone, Kulgan said, "Gamina, can William speak to' other creatures besides

Fantus?'

' I don't know. I'll ask him.

They watched in fascination as the girl's head cocked to one side, as if she were listening to something. After a moment she nodded. He said only sometimes. Most animals aren't very interesting. They think a lot about food and other animals, is all.

Kulgan looked as though he had been given a present. 'This is wonderful. Such a talent. We have never heard of a case of a human communicating directly with animals. Certain magicians have hinted at such an ability in the past, but never like this. We shall have to investigate this fully.'

Gamina's eyes widened as her face took on an expectant look. She sat up and her head came around to face the door, and an instant later Pug and Dominic entered. Both looked weary, but there was no sign of the sorrow Kulgan and the others had feared.

Before the question could be asked, Pug said, 'He still lives, though he was deeply afflicted.' He noticed Gamina in Kulgan's lap, looking as if that physical contact were somehow vital to her. 'Are you better?' Pug asked. She ventured a slight smile and a nod.

Some communication passed between them and Pug said, "I think he will recover. Katala will stay at his side. Brother Dominic has proved a great help, for he is versed in healing arts. But Rogen is very old, Gamina, and if he doesn't recover, you must understand and be strong.'

Gamina's eyes brimmed with moisture, but she nodded slightly. Pug came over and drew up a chair, as did the monk. Pug seemed to notice the addition of Meecham for the first time and they greeted each other. A quick introduction to Dominic was made, and then Pug said, 'Gamina, you could be a big help to us. Are you willing?' .How?

'There has never been an occurrence like today's to my knowledge. I must know what made you so afraid for

Rogen.' There was something in Pug's manner that revealed deep concern. He masked it well, so as not to distress the child, but it still wasn't completely hidden. Gamina looked frightened. She shook her head and something passed between the little girl and Pug. Pug said, "Whatever it was, it could make the difference in Rogen's living. Something we do not understand is involved in this, we should know about it.'

Gamina bit her lower lip slightly. Gardan was struck by the fact the girl was showing considerable bravery. From what little he had heard of the girl's lot, it had been a terrible one. To grow up in a world where people were always suspicious and hostile, and those thoughts were always heard, must have kept the child on the edge, of madness. For her to trust these men at all bordered on the heroic. Rogen's kindness and love must have been endless to counter-balance the pain this child had known. Gardan thought that if any man deserved the occasionally bestowed title of 'saint' the temples used for their heroes and martyrs, then it was Rogen.

More conversation passed between Pug and Gamina, still silent. Finally Pug said, 'Speak so we might all hear. All these men are your friends, child, and they will need to hear your story to stop Rogen and others from being hurt again.'

Gamina nodded. I was with Rogen.

'What do you mean?' asked Pug.

When he used his second sight, I went with him.

'How were you able?' said Kulgan.

Sometimes when someone thinks things, or sees things, I can see or hear what they do.' It's hard when they aren't thinking at me. I can do it best with Rogen. I could see what he saw, in my mind.

Kulgan pushed the child slightly away so he might better look at her. 'Do you mean to say you can see Rogen's visions?' The girl nodded. 'What about dreams?' Sometimes. .

Kulgan hugged her tightly. 'Oh, what a fine child you are! Two miracles in one day. Thank you, wonderful child!'

Gamma smiled, the first happy expression any of them had seen. Pug threw him a questioning look, and Kulgan said, 'Your son can speak to animals.' Pug's jaw dropped, and the stout magician continued, "But that is not important for the moment. Gamina, what did Rogen see that hurt him so badly?'

Gamina began to tremble and Kulgan held her closely. It was bad. He saw a city burning and people being hurt by bad creatures.

pug said, 'Do you know the city? Is it some place you and Rogen have seen?'

Gamina shook her head, her big eyes seemingly as round as saucers. No. It was just a city.

"What else?" asked Pug gently.

The girl shivered. He saw something . . . a man.? there was a strong feeling of confusion, as if she was dealing with concepts she could not fully comprehend. The man.? Saw Rogen.

Dominic said softly, 'How could something in a seeing sense the seer? A vision is a prophetic look at what might happen. What sort of thing could sense a magic witness across the barriers of time and probability?'

Pug nodded. 'Gamina, what did this "man" do to Rogen?'

It.? He.? reached out and hurt him. He.? said some words.

Katala entered the room, and the child looked up at her expectantly. Katala said, 'He's fallen into a deep, normal 'sleep. I think he will recover now.' She came up behind the chair Kulgan sat in and leant on the back, she reached down and cupped Gamina's chin. 'You should be getting to bed, child.'

Pug said, 'A little longer.' Katala sensed her husband was concerned with something vital and nodded agreement.

He said, 'Just before he fainted, Rogen used a word. It is important for me to know where he heard that word. I think he heard the thing, the bad man, in the vision use the word. I need to know what Rogen heard the bad man say.. Can you remember the words, Gamina?'

She laid her head down on Kulgan's chest and nodded very slightly, obviously afraid to remember them. Pug spoke in reassuring tones. 'Would you tell them to us?' No. But I can show you.

"How?" asked Pug.

I can show you what Rogen saw, she answered. I just Can.

'All of us?' asked Kulgan. She nodded. The tiny girl sat up in Kulgan's lap and took a deep breath, as if steeling herself. Then she closed her eyes and took them all into a dark place.

Black clouds raced overhead, angry on the bitter wind. Storms threatened the city. Massive gates lay shattered, for engines of war had worked their destruction on wood and steel. Everywhere fires burned out of control as a city died. Creatures and men savaged those found hiding in cellars and attics, and blood pooled in the gutters of the streets. In the central market a mound of bodies had been piled nearly twenty feet high. Atop the corpses rested a platform of dark wood, upon which a throne had been placed. A moredhel of striking appearance sat on the throne, surveying the chaos his servants had visited

upon the city. At his side stood a figure draped all in black robes, deep hood and large sleeves hiding every physical clue as to what manner 'of creature it was. But the attention of Pug and the others was drawn to something beyond the pair, a presence of darkness, some strange unseen thing that could be felt. Lurking in the background, it was the true source of power behind the two upon the platform. The black-robed creature pointed at something, and a green-scaled hand could be seen. Somehow, the presence behind the two made contact, made itself known to the onlookers. It knew it was being observed, and its response was one of anger and disdain. It reached out with alien powers and spoke, carrying to those in the room a message of grey despair. All in the room shook themselves from the girl's vision. Dominic, Kulgan, Gardan, and Meecham appeared disturbed, chilled by the menace in what the girl had shown them, though it could only be a shadow of the firsthand experience.

But Kasumi, Katala, and Pug were rocked. When the child had finished, tears streaked down Katala's face and Kasumi had lost his usual Tsurani mask, his face ashen and drawn. Pug appeared hardest hit of all as he sat back heavily on the floor. He lowered his head, withdrawing inside himself for a moment.

Kulgan looked about in alarm. Gamina seemed more distressed by the reaction than by recalling the image. Katala sensed the child's distress and picked her up from Kulgan's lap, hugging her closely. Dominic said, 'What is it?'

Pug looked up and, more than anything, appeared suddenly fatigued, as if the weight of two worlds once again was his to bear. Finally he spoke, slowly. 'When Rogen was at last freed of the pain, the last words he spoke were ""the Darkness, the Darkness." That is what he saw behind those two figures. The Darkness Rogen saw spoke these words: "intruder, whoever you are, wherever you are, know my power is coming. My servant prepares the way. Tremble, for I come, As was in the past, so shall be in the future, now and forever. Taste my power." He, it, must have somehow reached out and touched Rogen then, causing the terror, the pain.'

Kulgan said, 'How can this be?'

Softly, hoarsely, Pug spoke. "I do not know, old friend. But now a new dimension is added to the mystery of who seeks Arutha's death and what lies behind all the black arts being thrown at him and his allies.'

Pug buried his face in his hands a Moment, then looked around the room. Gamina clung to Katala, and all eyes were upon Pug.

Dominic said, 'But there is something else.' He looked



at Kasumi and Katala. 'What is that tongue? I heard it as well as you, as I heard Rogen's foreign words, but know it not at all.'

It was Kasumi who said, 'The words were . . . ancient, a language used in the temples. I could only understand a little. But the words were Tsurani.'

14

ElvandBr

The forest was silent.

Large branches, ancient beyond memory, arched high overhead, blocking out most of the day's sunlight, the surrounding environment revealed a soft green glow, devoid of direct shadows and full of deep recesses of dimly perceived paths, winding away.

They had been in the elven forests for over two hours, 'since midmorning, and as yet had seen no sign of elven activity. Martin had thought they would be intercepted shortly after crossing the river Crydee, but as yet no elf had been seen.

baru spurred his horse forward and pulled even with Martin and Arutha. 'I think we are being watched,' said the Hadati.

Martin said, 'For some minutes now. I only caught a glimpse a while ago.'

'if the elves are watching, why don't they come forward?' asked Jimmy.

Martin said, 'it may not be elves who watch us. We will not be completely free from care until we are within the bounds of Elvandar. Keep alert.'

For several minutes they rode, then even the chirping birds ceased their noise. The forest seemed to be holding its breath.' Martin and Arutha pushed their mounts through narrow paths, barely wide enough for a man afoot. Suddenly the silence was broken by a raucous hooting, punctuated by shrieks. A stone came hurling past Baru's head and a storm of rocks, twigs, and sticks followed. Dozens of small hairy figures jumped from behind trees and brush, howling furiously while pelting the riders with missiles.

Arutha charged forward, fighting to keep his mount under control, as did the others. He steered through the trees while ducking under branches. As he moved towards four or five child-sized creatures, they shrieked in terror and leapt away in different directions. Arutha singled out one and rode up behind it. The creature found itself blocked by a deadfall, a jumbled mass of fallen trees, heavy brush, and a large rock. It turned to face the Prince.

Arutha had his sword drawn and reined in, ready to strike. Then all anger flowed out of him at the sight before him. The creature made no effort to attack, but instead backed as far as possible into the tangle, an expression of pure terror on its face.

It was a very manlike face, with large, soft brown eyes. A short but human nose was set above a wide mouth. The creature's lips were drawn back in a mock snarl, showing an impressive arrangement of teeth, but the eyes were wide with fear and large tears flowed down its hairy cheeks. Otherwise it looked like a small ape or large monkey.

A loud racket erupted around Arutha and the creature as more of the small man-things surrounded them. They howled fiercely, pounding on the ground with savage fury, but Arutha saw it was all show, there was no real threat in their actions. Several feigned attacks, but ran shrieking in terror if Arutha turned to face them.

The others came riding up behind, 'and the little creature Arutha had trapped cried piteously. Baru pulled up alongside the Prince and said, 'As soon as you charged, these others fled after you.'

The riders could see that the gathered creatures were abandoning their mock fury and their expressions were now concerned. They chattered to one another in what sounded like words.

Arutha put away his sword. 'We will not hurt you.'

As if they understood, the creatures quieted. The one who was trapped watched guardedly.

Jimmy said, 'What are they?'

Martin said, 'I don't know. Man and boy I've hunted these woods and I've never seen their like.'

"They are gwali, Martin Longbow.'

The riders turned in their saddles and were greeted by the sight of a company of five elves. One of the creatures raced to stand before the elves. He pointed an indicting finger towards the riders. In a singsong voice he said, "Calin, mans come. Hurt Ralala. Make stop hurt her.'

Martin left his horse. "Well met, Calin!' He and the elf embraced, and the other elves greeted him in turn. Then Martin led them to where his companions waited and said, 'Calin, you remember my brother.'

'Greetings, Prince of Krondor.'

'Greetings, Elf Prince.' He cast a sidelong glance at the surrounding gwali. "You save us from being overwhelmed. '

Calin smiled. "I doubt it. You look a capable company.'

He came up to Arutha. "It has been a while since we last spoke. What brings you to our forests, Arutha, and with so strange an entourage? Where are your guardsmen and banners?' 'That is a long tale, Calin, and one I wish to share with

your mother and Tomas.'

Calin agreed. To an elf patience was a way of life.

With the tension broken, the gwali cornered by Arutha broke and ran to join the others of her kind, who stood around watching. Several examined her, grooming her hairy hide, patting her reassuringly after her ordeal.

Satisfied she was unharmed, they quieted down and

watched the elves and humans. Martin said, 'Calin, what are these creatures?' Calin laughed, his pale blue eyes crinkling at the

corners. He stood as tall as Arutha but was even more slender than the rangy Prince. "As I have said, they are called gwali. This rascal is named Apalla." He patted the head of the one who had spoken to him. "He is something of a leader among them, though I doubt they really entertain the concept. It may be he is simply more talkative than the others.' Looking at the rest of Arutha's company, he said, "Who are these with you?'

Arutha made introductions and Calin said, "You are welcome to Elvandar.'

"What is a gwali?' asked Roald.

Calin said, 'These are, and that is the best answer I can give. They have lived with us before, though this is their first visit in a generation. They are simple folk, without guile. They are shy and tend to avoid strangers. When afraid, they will run unless they are cornered, then they will feign attack. But don't be misled by those ample teeth, they're for tough nuts and insect carapaces.' He turned his attention to Apalla. "Why did you try to scare these men?'

The gwali jumped up and down excitedly. 'Powula make little gwali.' He grinned. "She don't move. We afraid mans hurt Powula and little gwali.'

"They are protective of their young,' said Calin in

understanding. "Had you actually tried to hurt Powula and the baby, they would have risked attacking you. Had there been no birthing, you never would have seen them.' He said to Apalla, 'it is all right. These men are friends. They will not hurt Powula or her baby."

Hearing this, the other gwali came pouring out from the protecting trees and began examining the strangers With open curiosity. They tugged at the riders' clothing, which was quite different from the green tunics and brown trousers the elves wore. Arutha suffered the examination

for only a minute, then said, "We should get to your mother's court soon, Calin. If your friends are finished?"

'Please,' said Jimmy, his nose wrinkling as he pushed away a gwali who hung from a branch next to him. 'Don't they ever bathe?'

"Unfortunately, no,' answered Calin. He said to the gwali, "That's enough, we must go.' The gwali accepted the instruction with good grace and quickly vanished among the trees, except Apalla, who seemed more' assertive than the rest. 'They will continue that sort of thing all day if you allow them to, but they don't mind when you shoo them off. Come.' He told Apalla, "We go to Elvandar. Tend to Powula. Come when you will.'

The gwali grinned and nodded vigorously, then scampered off after his brethren. In a moment there was no hint that a gwali existed within miles.

Calin waited until Martin and Arutha had remounted.

'We are only a half day's travel to Elvandar.' He and the other elves began their run through the forest. Except for Martin, the riders were surprised at the pace the elves set. It was not taxing for the mounts, but for a human runner to keep it up for a half day would be close to impossible.

After a short while Arutha drew even with Calin, who loped along at an easy pace. 'Where did those creatures come from?'

Calin shouted, 'No one knows, Arutha. They're a comic lot. They come from some place to the north, perhaps beyond the great mountains. They will show up, stay a season or two, then vanish. We sometimes call them the little wood ghosts. Even our trackers can't follow them after they depart. It's been nearly fifty years since their last visit, and two hundred since the one before that.' Calin breathed easily as he ran in long, fluid strides.

"How fares Tomas?' asked Martin.

"The Prince Consort fares well.'

'What of the child?'

"He is well. He is a fit, handsome child, though he may prove somewhat different. His heritage is . . . unique.'

"And the Queen?'

"Motherhood agrees with her,' answered her elder son

with a smile.

They fell into silence, for Arutha found it difficult to continue the conversation while negotiating the trees, even if Calin did not. Swiftly through the forest they travelled, each passing minute bringing them closer to Elvandar and hopes fulfilled . . . or hopes dashed.

The journey was soon completed. One moment they

were travelling through heavy forest, then they entered a large clearing. This was the first glimpse any of them, save Martin, had had of Elvandar.

Giant trees of many colours rose high above the surrounding forest. In the afternoon light the topmost leaves seemed ablaze with colour where golden sunlight struck them. Even from this distance, figures could be seen along the high paths spanning the gaps between boles. Several of the giant trees were unique to this place, their leaves a dazzling silver, gold, or even white. As the day's shadows deepened, they could be seen to have a faint glow of their own. It was never truly dark in Elvandar.

As they crossed the clearing, Arutha could hear the astonished comments of his companions.

Roald said, "Had I known . . . you'd have had to tie me up to keep me from coming along.'

Laurie agreed. "It makes the weeks in the forest worth it.'

Baru said, "The tales of our singers do not do justice to it. '

Arutha awaited a comment from Jimmy, but when the voluble lad said nothing, Arutha looked behind. Jimmy rode in silence, his eyes drinking in the splendour of this place, so alien from anything seen in his life. The usually jaded boy had finally encountered something so outside his experience, he was truly awestruck.

They reached the outer boundary of the tree-city and on all sides could hear the soft sounds of a busy community. A hunting party approached from another quarter, bearing a large stag, which they carried off to be butchered. An open area outside the trees was set aside for the dressing of carcasses.

They reached the trees and reined in. Calin instructed his companions to care for the horses and led Arutha's party up a circular stairway carved into the trunk of the biggest oak the Prince and the others had ever seen. Reaching a platform at the top, they passed a group of elver fletchers practising their craft. One saluted Martin, who returned the greeting and briefly inquired if he might impose upon their generosity. With a smile, the fletcher handed Martin a bundle of finely craned bowshafts, which the Duke placed in his nearly empty quiver. He spoke quick thanks in the elver tongue and he and his companions continued onwards.

Calin led them up another steep stairway to a platform. He said, "From here it may prove difficult for some of you. Keep to the centre of the paths and platforms and do not look down if you feel discomforted. Some humans find the heights distressing.' He said the last as if it was almost incomprehensible.

They crossed the platform and mounted more steps,

passing other elves hurrying about their business. Many were dressed like Calin, in simple woods garb, but others wore long colourful robes, fashioned of rich fabrics, or bright tunics and trousers, equally colourful. The women were all beautiful, though it was a strange, inhuman loveliness. Most of the men looked young, about Calin's age. Martin knew better. Some elves hurrying past were young, twenty, thirty years of age, while others, equally young in appearance, were several hundred years old. Though he looked younger than Martin, Calin was past a hundred and had taught Martin hunting skills when the Duke had been a boy.

They continued along a walkway, nearly twenty feet wide, stretching along enormous branches, until they came to a ring of trunks. In the midst of the trees a large platform had been constructed, almost sixty feet across. Laurie wondered if even a single drop of rain could worm its way through the thick canopy of branches overhead to fall on a royal brow. They had reached the Queen's court.

Across this platform they walked, to a dais upon which two thrones were erected. In the slightly higher of the two sat an elver woman, serenity enhancing her already near-flawless beauty. Her face with its arched brows and finely chiselled nose was dominated by her pale blue eyes. Her hair was light red-brown, with streaks of gold like Calin's - giving it the appearance of being struck by sunlight. Upon her head rested no crown, only a simple circlet of gold that pulled back her hair, but there was no mistaking Aglaranna, the Elf Queen,

Upon the throne to her left sat a man. He was an imposing figure, taller than Martin by two inches. His hair was sandy-blond and his face looked young, while still holding some elusive ageless quality. He smiled at the sight of the approaching party, giving him an even younger look. His face was similar to the elves', yet with a difference. His eyes lacked colour to the point of being grey, and his eyebrows were less arched. His face was less angular, possessing a strong, square jaw. His ears, revealed by the golden circlet that held back his hair, were slightly pointed, less upswept than those of the elves. And he was much more massive in the chest and shoulders than any elf.

Calin bowed before them. 'Mother and Queen, Prince and Warleader, we are graced by guests.'

Both rulers of Elvandar rose and walked forward to greet their guests. Martin was greeted with affection by the Queen and Tomas, and the others were shown courtesy and warmth. Tomas said to Arutha, 'Highness, you are welcome.'

Arutha replied, "I thank Her Majesty and His

Highness.'

Seated around the court were other elves. Arutha recognized the old counsellor Tathar, from his visit to Crydee years before. Quick introductions were made. The Queen bade them rise and led everyone to a reception area adjoining the court, where they were all informally seated. Refreshments were brought, food and wine, and Aglaranna said, 'We are pleased to see old friends' she nodded at Martin and Arutha - "and to welcome new' - she indicated the others. 'Still, men rarely visit us

without cause. What is yours, Prince of Krondor?'

Arutha told them his tale while they dined. From first to last the elves sat silently listening. When Arutha was finished, the Queen said, 'Tathar?'

The old counsellor nodded. 'The Hopeless Quest.' Arutha asked, "Are you saying you know nothing of Silverthorn?'

'No,' replied the Queen. 'The Hopeless Quest is a legend among our people. We know the aelebera plant. We know of its properties. That is what the legend of the Hopeless quest tells us. Tathar, please explain.'

The old elf, the first Jimmy and the others had seen who showed some signs of age - faint lines around the eyes and hair so pale it bordered on white - said, "in the lore of our people, there was a Prince of Elvandar who was betrothed. His beloved had been courted by a moredhel warrior, whom she spumed. In his wrath the moredhel poisoned her with a draught brewed from the aelebera and she fell into a sleep unto death. Thus the Prince of Elvandar began the Hopeless Quest, in search of that which could cure her, the aelebera, the Silverthorn. Its power is such that it can cure as well as kill.

But the aelebera grows only in one place, Moraelin, in your language the Black Lake. It is a place of power, sacred to the moredhel, a place where no elf may go. The legend says the Prince of Elvandar walked the edge of Moraelin until he had worn a canyon around it. For he may not enter Moraelin, nor will he leave until he has found that which will save his beloved. It is said he walks there still.'

Arutha said, "But I am not an elf. I will go to Moraelin, if you'll but show me the way.'

Tomas looked around the assembly. "We shall place your feet upon the path to Moraelin, Arutha,' he said, "but not until you've rested and taken counsel. Now we shall show you places where you may refresh yourselves and sleep until the night-time meal.'

The meeting broke up as the elves moved away, leaving Calin, Tomas, and the Queen with Arutha's group.

Martin said, 'What of your son?'

With a broad smile, Tomas motioned for them to follow. He led them through a bough-covered passage to a room, its vault formed by a great elm, where a baby lay sleeping in a cradle. He was less than six months old from the look of him. He slept deeply, dreaming, little fingers flexing slightly. Martin studied the child and could see what Calin meant by saying his heritage was unique. The child looked more human than elver, his ears being only slightly pointed and possessing lobes, a human trait unknown among elves. His round face looked more like that of any chubby infant, but there was an edge to it, ' something which said to Martin that this was a child who was more his father's than his mother's. Aglaranna reached down and gently touched him while he slept. Martin said, "What have you named him?"

Softly the Queen said, "Calis." Martin nodded. In the elver tongue it meant 'child of the green' , referring to life and growth. It was an auspicious name.

Leaving the baby, Martin and the others were taken to rooms within the tree-city of Elvandar, where they found tubs for bathing and sleeping mats. All were quickly clean and asleep, save Arutha, whose mind wandered from an image of Anita asleep to a silver plant growing on the shore of a black lake.

Martin sat alone, enjoying the first evening of his first visit to Elvandar in a year. As much as any place, even castle Crydee, this was his home, for as a boy he had played and been one with the elver children.

'Soft elver footsteps caused him to turn. "Galain," he said, happy to see the young elf, cousin to Calin. He was Martin's oldest friend. They embraced and Martin said, 'I expected to see you sooner.'

'I've just returned from patrolling along the northern edge of the forests. Some strange things are going on up ' there. I hear you may have some light to shed on what they may be. '

'A small candle flicker, perhaps,' said Martin. "Some evil is at play up there, have no doubt.'

He filled Galain in, and the young elf said, "Terrible deeds, Martin.' He sounded genuinely sorry to hear about Anita. 'Your brother?' The question, in elvish fashion, carried a variety of nuances in the intonation, each concerning itself with a different aspect of Arutha's trials.

'He perseveres, somehow. He puts it all out of his mind sometimes, other times he is nearly overwhelmed by it. I don't know how he keeps from going mad. He loves her so very deeply.' Martin shook his head.

'You've never wed, Martin. Why?'

Martin shook his head. 'I've never met her.'



'You are sad.'

'Arutha's a difficult man at times, but he is my brother I remember him as a child. Even then it was hard to get close to him. Perhaps it was his mother's death, when he was still so young. He kept things distant. For all the toughness, for all the hard edges, he's easily hurt.'

"You two are much alike.'

'There is that,' Martin agreed.

Galain stood quietly next to Martin awhile. "We shall help, as much as we can.'

'We must go to Moraelin.'

The young elf shivered, an unusual display even in one so inexperienced. "That is a bad place, Martin. It is called Black Lake for a reason that has nothing to do with the colour of the water. It is a well of madness. The *moredhel* go there to dream dreams of power. It lies on the Dark Path '

'it was a Valheru place?

Galain nodded yes.

'Tomas?' Again the question carried a variety of meanings.

Galain was especially close to Tomas, having followed him during the Riftwar.

'He will not go with you. He has a new son. Calis will be tiny for so short a time, only a few years. A father should spend that time with his baby. Also, there is the risk.' Nothing more needed to be said, for Martin understood. He had watched the night Tomas had almost succumbed to the mad spirit of the Valheru within him. It had nearly cost Martin his life. It would be some time before Tomas felt secure enough to challenge his own heritage, to again awaken that dread being contained within. And he would venture into a Valheru place of power only when he felt circumstances were grave enough to justify the risk.

Martin smiled his crooked smile. 'Then we shall go alone, we humans of meagre talents.'

Galain returned the smile. 'You are many things, so I doubt your talents meagre.' Then he lost the smile. "Still, you would do well to take counsel with the Spellweavers before you go. There is dark power at Moraelin, and magic overcomes much in the way of strength and courage. '

Martin said, 'We will. We speak soon.' He looked to where an elf approached, Arutha and the others behind.

'I think now. Will you come?'

'I've no place in the circle of elders. ' Besides, I have not eaten for a day. I will rest. Come talk if you need.'

'I will.'

Martin hurried to join Arutha. They followed the elf, who led the humans back to the council. When all were seated before Aglaranna and Tomas, the Queen said,

"Tathar, speak for the Spellweavers: say what counsel you have for Prince Arutha."

Tathar stepped into the centre of the court circle and said, "Strange things have been occurring for some turns of the middle moon. We expected southward movement of the moredhel and goblins back to the homes they were driven from during the riftwar, but this has not come to be. Our scouts in the north have tracked many bands of goblins heading across the Great Northern mountains into the Northlands. Moredhel scouts have come unusually close to our borders. "The gwali come to us again because they say they don't like the place they lived in any more. It is hard to make sense of them at times, but we know they came from the north. so what you have told us, Prince Arutha, causes us deep concern. First, because we share your sorrow. Second, because the manifestations you tell of bespeak a power of great evil with a long reach and far-flung minions. But most of all, because of our own ancient history.

'Long before we drove the moredhel from our forests, for taking to the Dark Path of Power, the elver people were one. Those of us who lived in the forests were farther from our masters, the Valheru, and because of this were less attracted to the intoxication of power dreams. Those of us who lived close to our masters were seduced by those dreams and became the moredhel.' He looked to the Queen and Tomas, and both nodded.

"What is little spoken of is the cause of our divorcement from the moredhel, who once were our blood. Never before has any human been told all."

" In the dark era of the Chaos wars, many changes in the lands occurred. From the people of the elves, four groups rose.' Martin leant forward, for as much as he knew of elvenkind, more than almost any man alive, this was all new to him. Until this moment he had always believed only the moredhel and elves were the sum total of elvenkind. "The most wise and powerful, numbering

the greatest Spellweavers and scholars, were the eldar. They were the caretakers for all that their masters had plundered from across the cosmos, arcane works, mystical knowledge, artifacts. and riches. It was they who first began fashioning what is now Elvandar, lending it magic aspect. They vanished during the Chaos Wars, for they were among our masters' first servants, and it is supposed that being very close to them, they perished with them Of the elves and Brotherhood of the Dark Path, the elledhel and moredhel in our tongue, you know something. But there were yet other kin of ours, the glamredhel, which name means ""the chaotic ones" or "the mad ones". They were changed by the Chaos Wars, becoming a nation of insane, savage warriors. For a time elves and

moredhel were one, and both were warred upon by the mad ones. Even after the moredhel were driven from Elvandar, they remained the sworn enemy of the glamredhel. We speak little of these days, for you must remember that while we speak of eledhel, moredhel, and glamredhel, all elvenkind is one race, even to this day. It is simply that some of our people have chosen a dark way of life.'

' Martin was astonished. For all he knew of elven culture, he had, like other humans, always supposed the moredhel a race apart, related to the elves but somehow different. Now he realized why the elves had always been reticent in discussing their relationship to the moredhel. They saw them as being one with themselves. In an instant Martin understood. The elves mourned the loss of their brothers to the lure of the Dark Path.

Tathar continued. 'Our lore tells of the time when the last great battle in the north was fought, when the armies of the moredhel and their goblin servants at last crushed the glamredhel. The moredhel rampaged, obliterating our mad cousins in a terrible war of genocide. Even to the smallest infant, the glamredhel were supposedly slaughtered, lest they again rise and challenge the supremacy of the moredhel. It is the single blackest shame in the memory of our race that one segment of our people utterly destroyed another. But what concerns you is this, at the heart of the

the moredhel host stood a company called the Black Slayers, moredhel warriors who had renounced their mortality to become monsters with but one purpose: to kill for their master. Once dead, the Black Slayers rise again to do their master's bidding. Once risen from the dead, they may be halted only by magic means, by utterly destroying the body, or by cutting the hearts from out of their bodies. Those who rode against you on the road to Sarth were Black Slayers, Prince Arutha. "

Before the battle of obliteration, the moredhel had already gone far down the Dark Path, but something caused them to descend to these new depths of horror, the Black Slayers and the genocide. 'They had become a tool of an insane monster, a leader who sought to emulate the vanished Valheru and bring all the world under his dominion. It was he who had gathered the moredhel under his banner and who had given rise to the abomination that was the Black Slayers. But in that last battle he was wounded unto death, and with his passing the moredhel ceased to be a nation. His captains gathered and sought to determine a successor. They quickly fell out with one another and became much like the goblins tribes, clans, families, never able to combine under one leader for long. The siege of Carss Keep, fifty years past,

was but a skirmish compared to the might the moredhel mustered under this leader. But with his passing, an 'era of moredhel might came to an end. For he was untRue, a charismatic, hypnotic being of strange abilities, able to weld the moredhel into a nation.

'The leader's name was murmandamus.'

Arutha said, 'is it possible he's somehow returned?'

'Anything may be possible. Prince Arutha, or so it seems to one who has lived as long as I,' answered Tathar. "It may be that one seeks to unite the moredhel by invoking that ancient name, gathering them together under one banner.

"Then there is this business of the serpent priest. So despised are the Pantathians that even the moredhel slaughter them when they find them. But that one of them is a servant of this Murmandamus hints at dark alliances. It warns us we may be facing forces beyond our expectations. If the nations of the north are rising, we all must again face a testing, one which will rival that of the outworlders in peril for our peoples.'

Baru stood, in Hadati fashion, indicating he wished to speak. Tathar inclined his head in Baru's direction, and he said, 'Of moredhel lore my people know little, save that the Dark Brothers are enemies of our blood. This much I may add: Murad is counted a great chieftain, perhaps the greatest living today, one who might command ' many hundreds of warriors. That he serves with the Black Slayers speaks of Murmandamus's power. Murad would serve only one whom he feared.' And one who could visit fear upon Murad is one to be feared indeed.'

Arutha said, 'As I told the Ishapians, much of this is speculation. I must be concerned with finding Silverthorn.'

But even as he uttered those words, Arutha knew he was speaking falsely. Too much indicated that the threat from the north was real. This was no rash of goblin raids on northern farmers. This was a potential for invasion surpassing that of the Tsurani. In the face of this. his refusal to set aside all considerations except finding a cure for Anita was shown for what it was: an obsession.

'They may be one and the same, Highness,' said Aglaranna. 'What seems to be unfolding here is a madman's desire to gather the moredhel and their servants and allies under his dominion. To do so he must bring a prophecy to fruition. He must destroy the Bane of Darkness. And what has he accomplished? He has forced you to come to the one place he is certain to find you.'

Jimmy sat upright, his eyes wide. 'He's waiting for you!' he blurted, ignoring protocol. 'He's at this Black Lake!' Laurie and Roald put their hands upon his shoulders, in reassurance. Jimmy sat back, looking embarrassed.

Tathar said, "From the lips of youth . . . I and the others have considered, and in our judgment, that is what must be occurring, Prince Arutha. Since the gift of the ishapien talisman, murmandamus must devise another way to find you, or he risks his alliances dissolving. The moredhel are much as others - they need to raise crops and tend herds. Should Murmandamus tarry overlong in bringing the prophecy to fruition, they may desert him, save for those who have taken dark vows, such as the Black Slayers. His agents will have passed word that you have quit Sarth, and by now intelligence from Krondor will tell him you are upon a quest for that which will save your Princess. Yes, he will know you seek Silverthorn, and he, or one of his captains, such as Murad, will be waiting for you at Moraelin.' Arutha and Martin looked at each other. Martin shrugged. 'We never thought it would be easy.' Arutha regarded the Queen, Tomas, and Tathar. 'My thanks for your wisdom. But we will go to Moraelin.'

Arutha looked up as Martin came to stand nearby  
'Brooding?' asked the elder brother.

~Just . . . considering things, Martin.'

Martin sat next to Arutha, at the edge of a platform near the rooms they had been given. In the nights Elvandar glowed with a faint light, a phosphorescence that kept the elver city cloaked in a soft magic. 'What things are you considering?'

'That I may have let my preoccupation with Anita get in the way of my duty.'

Martin said, 'Doubt? Well then; you reveal yourself at last. Listen, Arutha, I've had doubts about this journey from the start, but if you let doubt block you, nothing gets done. You must simply make your best judgment and act.'

'And if I'm wrong?'

'Then you're wrong.'

Arutha lowered his head until it rested against a wooden rail. 'The problem is one of stakes. When I was a child, if I was wrong I lost a game. Now I could lose a nation.'

'Perhaps, but it still doesn't change the need to make your best judgment and act.'

""Things are getting out of hand. I wonder if it might not be best to return to Yabon and order Vandro's army into the mountains.'

'That might do it. But then there are places six may go an army may not.'

Arutha smiled a wry smile. 'Not very many.'

Martin returned the smile, almost a mirror image.

'True, but still there are one or two. From what Galain said about Moraelin, stealth and cunning will be more

important than strength. What if you marched Vandros's army up there and found Moraelin lay just the other side of a lovely road like the one up to the abbey at Sarth? Remember the one Gardan avowed could be held by a half-dozen grannies with brooms? I'll warrant Murmandamus has more than a half-dozen grandmothers up there. Even if you could battle Murmandamus's hordes and win, could you order one soldier to give his life so Anita should live? No, you and this Murmandamus play a game, for high stakes, but still a game. As long as Murmandamus thinks he can lure you up to Moraelin, we have a chance of stealing in and getting Silverthorn.'

Arutha looked at his brother. 'We do?' he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Of course. As long as we don't spring the trap, it

remains open. That is the nature of traps. If they don't know we're already inside, we might even get out.' He spent a quiet moment looking northwards, then said, 'it's so close. It's just up in those mountains, a week from here, no more. It's so close.' He laughed at Arutha. 'it would be a shame to come so close and quit.'

Arutha said, 'You're mad.'

'Perhaps,' said Martin. 'But just think, it's so close. Arutha had to laugh. 'All right. We leave tomorrow.'

The six riders set out the next morning, with the blessings of the Elf Queen and Tomas. Calin, Galain, and two other elves ran alongside the horsemen. As they lost sight of the Queen's court, a gwali swung along through the trees, crying, 'Calin!' The Elf Prince signalled a halt and the gwali dropped

from the branches and grinned at them. "Where mans going with Calin?"

'Apalla, we take them to the northern road. Then they travel to Moraelin.'

The gwali became agitated and shook his furry head.

'No go, mans. Bad place. Little Olnoli eaten there by bad thing.' 'What bad thing?' said Calin, but the gwali ran off

shrieking in fright before an answer was forthcoming.

Jimmy said, "Nothing like a happy send-off.'

Calin said, 'Galain, return and find Apalla and see if you can glean any sense from what he says.'

Galain said, 'i'll find out what he means and follow after.' He waved to the travellers and headed back after the gwali. Arutha motioned for the party to continue. For three days the elves guided them to the edge of their forests, up into the foothills of the Great Northern Mountains. Then, at midday on the fourth day, they came to a small stream, and on the other side they could

see the trail leading through the woodlands, towards a canyon. Calin said, 'Here is the limit of our holdings.' Martin said, 'What of Galain, do you think?' 'it may be he discovered nothing of worth, or it may have taken him a day or two to find Apalla. The gwali can be difficult to locate if they decide to be. If Galain meets us, we'll direct him after you. He will overtake you as long as you haven't crossed over into the heart of Moraelin.'

"Where would that be?' said Arutha.

"Follow that trail for two days until you come to a small valley. Cross it, and on the north face you'll see a waterfall. A trail leads up from there, and atop the plateau you'll be near the top of the falls. Follow the river upwards, until you reach its source. From that lake you'll find a trail again moving upwards, again to the north. That is the only way to Moraelin. You'll find a canyon, which winds around the lake in a complete circle. Legend says it is the tracks made by the mourning Elf Prince, wearing the ground down around the lake. It is called the Tracks of the Hopeless. There is only one way into Moraelin, across a bridge made by the moredhel. When you cross the bridge over the Tracks of the Hopeless, you will be in Moraelin. There you will find the Silverthorn. It is a plant with a light silver-green leaf of three lobes, with fruit like red holly berries. You will recognize it at once, for its name describes it: the thorns are silver. If nothing else, get a handful of the berries. It will lie close to the edge of the lake. Now go, and may the gods protect you.'

With brief farewells the six riders moved off, Martin and Baru in the lead, Arutha and Laurie following, Jimmy and Roald bringing up the rear. As they followed a turn, Jimmy glanced back, until he could no longer see the elves. He turned eyes forward, knowing they were now on their own, without allies or haven. He said a silent prayer to Banath and took a deep breath.

15

Return

Pug stared into the fire.

The small brazier in his study threw a dancing pattern of lights on the walls and ceiling. He ran his hand over his face, feeling fatigue in the very fabric of his being. He had laboured since Rogen's vision, sleeping and eating only when Katala pushed him from his studies. Now he carefully closed one of Macros's many books, he had been reading them exhaustively for a week. Since confronted with the impossibilities of Roger's vision, he had

sought every shred of information available to him...Only one other magic user upon this world had known anything pertaining to the world of Kelewan, and that had been Macros the Black. Whatever that dark presence in the vision, it had spoken a language that fewer than five thousand on Midkemia might even recognize - Pug Katala, Laurie, Kasumi and his Tsurani garrison at LaMut, and a few hundred ex-prisoners scattered around the Far Coast. And of them all, only Pug could fully understand the words spoken in Gamina's vision, for that language was a distant, dead ancestor of the presentday Tsurani tongue. Now Pug searched in vain through Macros's library for some hint of what this dark power might be.

Of the hundreds of volumes Macros had bequeathed to Pug and Kulgan, only a third had been catalogued. Macros, through his strange goblin-like agent, Gathis, had provided a listing of each title. In some cases that had proved helpful, for the work was well known by title alone. In other cases it was useless 'until the book was read. There were seventy-two works all called Magic, and a dozen other instances of several books with like nomenclature. Looking for possible clues to the nature of what they faced, Pug had closeted himself with the remaining works and begun skimming them for any hint of useful information. Now he sat, the work upon his knee, with a growing certainty about what he must do. Pug placed the book carefully upon his writing table and left his study. He walked down the stairs to the hall that connected all the rooms in use in the academy building. Work upon the upper level next to the tower that housed his workrooms had been halted by the rain that now beat down upon Stardock. A cold gust blew through a crack in the wall. and Pug gathered his black robe about himself as he entered the dining hall, which was used as a common room these days.

Katala looked up from where she ' sat embroidering, near the fireplace, in one of the comfortable chairs that occupied the half of the room used as common quarters. Brother Dominic and Kulgan had been talking, the heavysset magician puffing on his ever present pipe. Kasumi watched as William and Gamma played chess in a corner, their two little faces masks of concentration as they pitted their newly emerging skills against each other. William had been an indifferent student of the game until the girl had shown an interest. Being beaten by her seemed to bring out his sense of competition, heretofore limited to the ball yard. Pug thought to himself that, when time permitted, he would have to explore their gifts more closely. If time permitted . . .



Meecham entered, carrying a decanter of wine, and offered a wine cup to Pug. Pug thanked him and sat down next to his wife. Katala said, 'Supper is not for another hour. I had expected I would have to come and fetch you. I've finished what work I had and decided to relax a little before dining. .

Katala said, 'Good. You drive yourself too hard, Pug. With teaching others, supervising the construction of this monstrous building, and now locking yourself away in your study, you have had little time to spend with us.' Pug smiled at her. 'Nagging?'

'A wifely prerogative,' she said, returning his smile.

Katala was not a nag. Whatever displeasure she felt was openly voiced, and quickly resolved, by either compromise or one partner's acceptance of the other's intractability.

Pug looked about. 'Where is Gardan?'

Kulgan said, 'Aha, you see. If you hadn't been locked up in your tower, you'd have remembered he left today for Shamata, so he can send Lyam messages by military pouch. He'll be back in a week.'

'He went alone?' Kulgan settled back in his chair. "I cast a foretelling.

The rain will last three days. Many of the workers returned home for a short visit rather than sit in their barracks for three days. Gardan went with them. What have you been delving into in your tower these last few days? You've barely said a civil word for a week.'

Pug surveyed those in the room with him. Katala seemed absorbed by her needlework, but he knew she was listening closely for his answer. The children were intent upon their game. 'Kulgan and Dominic watched him with open interest. 'Reading Macros's works, seeking to discover something that might give a clue to what can be done. You?'

'Dominic and I have counselled with others in the village. We've managed to come to some conclusions.'

"Such as?'

"Now that Rogen is healing, and has been able to tell us in detail what he saw in his vision, some of our more talented youngsters have thrown themselves upon the problem.' Pug detected a mixture of amusement and pride in the older magician's words. 'Whatever it is out there that seeks to bring harm to the Kingdom, or Midkemia, is limited in power. Assume for a moment that it is, as you fear, some dark agency slipped through the rift from Kelewan, somehow, during the Riftwar. It has weaknesses, and fears to reveal itself fully.'

"Explain, please,' said Pug, his interest driving aside all fatigue.

'We will assume this thing is from Kasumi's homeworld and not seek some other more exotic explanation for its use of an ancient Tsurani dialect. But unlike Kasumi's former allies, it comes not in open conquest,' but rather seeks to use others as tools. Assume it came by the rift somehow. The rift is a year closed, which means it has been here for at least that long, and perhaps as long as eleven years, gathering servants like the Pantathian priests. Then it seeks to establish itself, by using a moredhel, the ""beautiful one", as Roger described him, as an agent. What we need truly fear is the dark presence behind that beautiful moredhel and the others. That is the ultimate author of this bloody business.

"Now, if all this is true, it seeks to manipulate and

employ guile rather than direct force. Why? Either it is too weak to act, and must employ others, or it is biding its time until it is able to reveal its true nature and come to "the fore.'

'Which all means we still must discover the identity and nature of this thing. this power.'

'True. Now, we also have done some speculation predicated upon the assumption that what we face is not of Kelewan-" pug interrupted. 'Do not waste time with that, Kulgan.

We must proceed on the assumption that what we face is from Kelewan, for that, at least, provides us with a possible avenue of approach. If Murmandamus is simply some moredhel witch-king come into his own, one who just happens to speak a long-dead Tsurani tongue. we can counter that. But an invasion by some dark power from Kelewan . . . that is the assumption we must make.'

Kulgan sighed loudly and relit his cold pipe. "I wish we had more time, and more idea of how to proceed. I wish we could examine some aspect of this phenomenon without risk. I wish a hundred things, but most of all I wish for one work by one reliable witness to this thing.'

'There is a place where such a work may exist.'

Dominic said, 'Where? I would gladly accompany you or anyone else to such a place, no matter what the risk.'

Kulgan barked a bitter laugh. 'Not likely, good brother.

My former student speaks of a place upon another world.'

Kulgan looked hard at Pug. 'The library of the Assembly.'

Kasumi said, 'The Assembly?'

Pug saw Katala stiffen. "In that place there may be answers that would aid our coming battle,' he said.

Katala never took her eyes from her work. In controlled tones she said, "it is good the rift is closed and cannot be reopened save by chance. Your life may already be ordered forfeit. Remember that your status as a Great One was called into question before the attack on the

Emperor. Who can doubt you are now named outlaw?

No, it is good there is no way you might return.'

Pug said, 'There is a way.'

Instantly Katala's eyes were ablaze as she looked hard at him. 'No, you cannot return.'

Kulgan said, 'How can there be a way back?'

"When I studied for the black robe, I was given a final task,' Pug explained. "Standing upon the Tower of Testing. I saw a vision of the time of the Stranger, a wandering star that imperiled Kelewan. It was Macros who intervened at the last to save Kelewan. Macros was again on Kelewan on the day I nearly destroyed the imperial Arena. It was obvious all the time and only this week did I understand.'

'Macros could travel between the worlds at will!' said Kulgan; comprehension dawning in his eyes. 'Macros had the means to fashion controllable rifts!'

'And I have found it. Clear instructions are in one of his books.'

Katala whispered, 'You cannot go.'

He reached over and took her white-knuckled hands in his own. "I must.' He faced Kulgan and Dominic. "I have the means of returning to the Assembly, and I must use it. Otherwise, should Murmandamus be a servant of some dark Kelewanese power, or simply a diversion while such a power comes into its own, we will be lost without hope. If we are to find a way of dealing with such a one, we must first identify it, discover its true nature, and to do that I must go to Kelewan.' He looked at his wife, then at Kulgan. "I will return to Tsuranuanni.'

It was Meecham who spoke first. "Well then. When do we leave?'

Pug said, 'We? I must go alone.

The tall franklin said, "You can't go alone,' as if that thought was the sheerest absurdity. 'When shall we leave?'

Pug looked up at Meecham. "You don't speak the language. You're too tall to be a Tsurani.'

"I'll be your slave. There are Midkemian slaves there,

you've said often enough.' His tone indicated the argument was over. He looked from Katala to Kulgan and said, 'There wouldn't be a moment's peace around here should anything happen to you.

William came over, Gamina behind him. 'Papa, please

take Meecham with you.'

please.

Pug put his hands in the air. "Very well. We'll establish some charade.' Kulgan said, "I feel a little better, which is a relative

statement not to be taken as approval.'

'Your objection is duly noted.'

Dominic said, "Now the issue has been broached I too, wish to again offer to accompany you.'

'You offered before you knew where I was going.

One Midkemian I can look after, two would prove too burdensome. '

"I have my uses,' replied Dominic. "I know the healer's arts and can perform my own brands of magic. And I have a good arm and can wield a mace.'

Pug studied the monk. 'You are taller than I by only a little. You might pass as a Tsurani, but there's the problem of language. '

'in Ishap's order we have magic means to learn languages.

While you prepare your rift spells, I can learn the Tsurani tongue and aid Meecham in learning it as well, if the Lady Katala or 'Earl Kasumi will help.'

William said, "I can help. I speak Tsurani.

Katala didn't look pleased, but agreed. Kasumi said, "I also.' He looked troubled.

Kulgan said, 'Of all here, Kasumi, I expected you would be the most likely to wish a return, yet you've said nothing.'

'When the last rift closed, my life on Kelewan ended. I am now Earl of LaMut. My tenure within the Empire of Tsuranuanni is but a memory. Even if it is possible to return. I would not, for I have taken oath to the King. But,' he said to Pug, 'will you carry messages for me to my father and brother? They have no way to know I live, let alone prosper.'

"of course. It is only right.' He said to Katala, 'Beloved. can you fashion two robes of the Order of Hantukama?'

She nodded. He explained to the others, "It is a missionary order; its members are commonly seen travelling about. Disguised as such, we shall attract little attention as we wander. Meecham can be our begging slave.'

Kulgan said, "I still don't like this idea. I am not happy.'

Meecham looked at Kulgan. "When you worry, you're happy.' Pug laughed at this. Katala put her arms around her husband and held him closely. She also was not happy.

Katala held up the robe and said, "Try this.'

Pug found it a perfect fit. She had carefully chosen fabrics that would most closely resemble those used upon Kelewan.

'Pug had been meeting daily with others in the community, delegating authority for his absence - and, as was understood but not spoken, against the probability that he would not return. Dominic had been learning Tsurani from Kasumi and William and aiding in Mee'cham's mastery of that language. Kulgan had been given

Macros's work on rifts to study so he could aid Pug in the formation of one.

Kulgan entered Pug's private quarters as Katala was inspecting her handiwork. 'You'll freeze in that.'

Katala said, 'My homeworld is a hot place, Kulgan. These light robes are what is commonly worn.'

'By women as well?' When she said yes, he said "Positively indecent," as he pulled out a chair.

William' and Gamina ran into the room. The little girl was a changed child now that Rogen's recovery was assured. She was William's constant companion, playing, competing, and arguing as if she were a sister. Katala had kept her in the family's quarters while the old man healed, in a room next to William's.

The boy shouted, 'Meecham's coming.' and broke out in gleeful laughter as he spun in a circle of delight.

Gamina laughed aloud as well, imitating William's spin, and Kulgan and Pug exchanged glances, for it was the first audible sound the child had ever made. Meecham entered the room, and the adults' laughter joined with the children's. The burly forester's hairy legs and arms stuck out from the short robe, and he stood awkwardly in the imitation Tsurani sandals. He looked around the room. 'So what's funny?'

Kulgan said, 'I've grown so used to seeing you in hunter's togs, I couldn't imagine what you'd look like.'

Pug said, 'You just look a little different than I had expected,' and tried to stifle a laugh.

The franklin shook his head in disgust. 'If you're done? When do we leave?' Pug said, 'Tomorrow morning, just after dawn. Instantly all laughter in the room died.'

They waited quietly around the hill with the large tree, on the north side of Stardock island. The rain had stopped, but a damp, cold wind blew, promising more rain shortly. Most of the community had come to see Pug, Dominic, and Meecham on their way. Katala stood next to Kulgan with her hands upon William's shoulders. Gamina clutched tightly to Katala's skirt, looking nervous and a little frightened.

Pug stood alone, consulting the scroll he had fashioned. A short way off, Meecham and Dominic waited, shivering against the cold, while they listened to Kasumi speak. He was intensively speaking of every detail of Tsurani custom and life he could remember that might prove important. He was constantly remembering details he had almost forgotten. The franklin held the 'travel bag' Pug had prepared, containing the usual items a priest would carry. Also inside, under those items, were a few things uncommon to a priest on Kelewan, weapons and coins of metal, a fortune by Kelewanese standards.

Kulgan came to where Pug indicated, holding a staff fashioned by a woodcarver in the village. He planted it firmly in the soil, then took another handed to him and placed it four feet away. He stepped back as Pug began to read aloud from the scroll.

Between the staves a field of light grew, rainbow colours dancing up and down. A crackling noise could be heard, and the air began to smell as it did after a lightning strike, acrid and pungent.

The light began to expand and change in colour, moving faster through the spectrum until it gleamed whitely. It grew in 'intensity until it was too bright to look upon. Still Pug's voice droned on. Then came a loud explosion of noise, as if a thunderclap had pealed between the staves, and a short gust of wind towards the gap between them, as if a sudden drawing in of air had occurred.

Pug put away his scroll and all looked at what he had fashioned. A shimmering square of grey 'nothingness' stood between the upright staves. Pug motioned to Dominic and said, 'I'll go through first. The rift is targeted to a glade behind my old estate, but it might have appeared elsewhere.'

If the environment proved hostile, he would have to step around the pole. entering it from the same side again, appearing back on Midkemia as if he had passed through a hoop. If he was able.

He turned and smiled at Katala and William. His son jiggled around nervously, but Katala's reassuring pressure on the boy's shoulders quieted him. She only nodded, her face composed. Pug stepped into the rift and vanished. There was an audible intake of breath at the sight, for only a few there knew what to expect. The following moments dragged on, and many unconsciously held their breath.

Suddenly Pug appeared from the other side of the rift and an audible sigh of relief came from those who waited. He came back to the others and said, it opens exactly where I had hoped it would. Macros's spellcraft was flawless.' He took Katala's hands. "It is next to the reflecting pool in the meditation glade.'

Katala fought back the tears. She had tended flowers around that pool, where a solitary bench looked over calm waters, when she had been mistress of that great estate. She nodded understanding, and Pug embraced her, then William. As Pug knelt before William, Gamina suddenly threw her arms around his neck. Be careful. He hugged her in return. "I will, little one.'

Pug motioned Dominic and Meecham to follow and walked through the rift. They hesitated the barest instant and followed him into the greyness.

The others stood watching for long minutes after the

three had vanished, and the rain began again. No one wished to leave. Finally, as the rain took on a more insistent quality, Kulgan said, 'Those set to watch, remain. The rest, back to work.' everyone slowly moved off, no one resenting Kulgan's sharp tone. They all shared his concern.

Yagu, chief gardener on the estate of Netoha, near the city of Ontoset, turned to find three strangers walking the path from the meditation glade to the great house. Two were priests of Hantukama, the Bringer of Blessed Health, though both were unusually tall for priests. Behind walked their begging slave, a captive barbarian giant from the last war. Yagu shuddered, for he was an ugly sort, with a horrible scar down his left cheek. In a culture of warriors; Yagu was a gentle man, preferring the company of his flowers and plants to that of men' who spoke only of warfare and honour. Still, he had a duty to his master's house and approached the three strangers. When they saw him coming, they halted, and Yagu bowed first, as he was initiating the conversation common courtesy until rank was established. 'Greetings, honoured priests. It is Yagu the gardener who presumes to interrupt your journey.'

Pug and Dominic bowed. Meecham waited to the rear, ignored, as was the custom. Pug said, "Greetings, Yagu. For two humble priests of Hantukama your presence is no interruption. Are you well?"

Yagu said, 'Yes, I am well,' finishing off the formal greeting of strangers. Then he took on a lofty stance, crossing his arms and sticking his chest out. 'What brings the priests of Hantukama to the house of my master?'

Pug said, 'We travel from Scrans to the City of the Plains. As we passed by, we saw this estate and 'hoped to beg a meal for poor missionaries. Is this possible?' Pug knew it was not Yagu's prerogative to say, but he let the scrawny gardener play out the role of deciding.

The gardener stroked his chin for a moment. 'it is permitted for you to beg, though I cannot say if you will be turned away or fed. Come, I will show you the kitchen.'

As they walked towards the house, Pug said, "May I inquire who lives in this wondrous abode?"

' Showing pride in the reflected glory of his master, Yagu said, 'This is the house of Netoha, called "He Who rises Qu'ickly".'

Pug feigned ignorance, though he was pleased to know his former servant was still in possession of the estate. "Perhaps," said Pug, 'it would not be too offensive for humble priests to pay respects to so august a personage.' Yagu frowned. His master was a busy man, but he also

made time for such as these. He would not be pleased to find the gardener had presumed to fend them off, though they were little more than beggars, not being from a powerful sect, such as the servants of Chochocan or Juran. "I will ask. It may be my master will have a moment for you. If not, then perhaps a meal may be had."

The gardener led them to a door Pug knew led into the kitchen area. The afternoon sun beat down upon them as the gardener disappeared inside. The house was a strange design of interconnecting buildings Pug had built nearly two years before. It had started something of a revolution in Tsurani architecture, but Pug doubted the trend had continued, given the Tsurani sensitivity to political fortune.

The door slid open and a woman stepped out, followed by Yagu. Pug bowed before she could get a look at his face. It was Almorella, a former slave Pug had freed. now wed to Netoha. She had been Katala's closest friend. Yagu said, 'My mistress graciously agrees to speak with the priests of Hantukama.'

From his bowing position Pug said, 'Are you well mistress?'

Hearing his voice, Almorella gripped the doorframe as she fought for breath. When Pug straightened, she forced herself to breathe and said, "I . . . am well." Her eyes widened and she began to speak his Tsurani name. Pug shook his head. "I have met your honoured husband. I hoped he might spare a moment for an old acquaintance . . ."

Almost inaudibly Almorella said, 'My husband always has time for . . . old friends.'

She bade them enter and closed the door behind. Yagu stood outside a moment, perplexed at his mistress's behaviour. But as the door slid shut, he shrugged and returned to his beloved plants. Who could understand the rich?

Almorella led them quickly and silently through the kitchen. She struggled to maintain her composure, barely concealing her shaking hands as she brushed past three startled slaves. They never noticed their mistress's agitated state, for their eyes were riveted on Meecham, the biggest barbarian slave they had ever seen, truly a giant among giants.

Reaching Pug's former workroom, she slid aside the door and whispered, "I will get my husband."

They entered and sat, Meecham awkwardly, upon plump cushions on the floor. Pug looked about the room and saw that little had changed. He felt a strange sense of



being in two places at the same time', for he could almost imagine opening the door to find Katala and William outside in the garden. But he wore the saffron-coloured robe of a priest of Hantukama, not the black of a Great One, and a terrible peril was possibly about to descend upon the two worlds with which his fate seemed forever intertwined. Since beginning the search for a return to Kelewan, a faint nagging had started at the back of Pug's mind. He sensed that his unconscious mind was operating as it often did, working on a problem while his attention was elsewhere. Something about all that had occurred on Midkemia had a faintly familiar quality to it, and he knew the time was soon coming when he would intuit what that quality was.

The door slid open and a man entered, Almorella behind. She closed the door, while the man bowed low.

'You honour my home, Great One.'

'Honours to your house, Netoha. Are you well?'

'I am well, Great One. How may I serve?'

'Sit, and tell me of the Empire.' Without hesitation Netoha sat. 'Does Ichindar still rule the Holy City?'

'The Light of Heaven still rules the Empire.'

'What of the Warlord?'

'Almecho, he you knew as Warlord, acted with honour and took his own life after you shamed him at the imperial Games. His nephew, Axantucar, wears the white and gold. He is of the Oaxatucan Family, one who gained by the death of others when . . . the peace was betrayed. All with stronger claims were killed, and many with claims as valid as his to the office ' of Warlord were . . . dealt with. The War Party is still firmly in control of the High Council.'

Pug considered. With the War Party still in control of the nations, there would be scant chance of finding sympathetic ears in the High Council, though the Game of the Council would continue. That terrible, seemingly never-ending struggle for power might provide the opportunity for discovering alliance.

'What of the Assembly?'

'I sent those things which you instructed, Great One. The others were burned as you commanded. I received only a note of thanks from the Great One Hochopepa nothing more.'

'What is the talk in the market?'

'I have not heard your name mentioned in many months. But just after you departed, it was said you attempted to lure the Light of Heaven into a trap bringing dishonour on yourself. You have been named outlaw and outcast by the Assembly, the first to have the black robe stripped away. Your words are no longer as law. Any who aid you do so at peril of their lives, and the

lives of their families, and the lives of their clan.'

Pug rose, 'We shall not tarry here, old friend. I would not risk your lives, nor the lives of your clan.'

Netoha spoke as he moved to open the door. "I know you better than most. You would not do what they accused you of, Great One.'

'Great One no longer. by edict of the Assembly.'

'Then I honour the man, Milamber,' he said, using Pug's Tsurani name. 'You have given us much. The name Netoha of the Chichimecha is upon the rolls of the Hunzan Clan. My sons will grow in greatness because of your generosity.'

Sons?'

Almorella patted her stomach. 'Next planting season .

The healer priests think twins.'

'Katala will be doubly pleased. First, to know the sister of her heart is well, and second, that you will be a mother.'

Almorella's eyes brimmed with moisture. "Katala is well? And the boy?'

"My wife and son are well and send you their love.

"Return with our greetings and affection, Milamber. I have prayed that someday we may again meet."

'Perhaps we shall. Not soon, but someday . . . Netoha, ' is the pattern intact?'

'it is, Milamber. Little has changed. This is still your home. '

Pug rose and motioned for the others to follow him. "I may have need of it for a quick return to my own lands. If I sound the arrival gong twice, have everyone quit the house at once, for there may be others behind me who will harm you. I hope it will not be so.'

"Your will, Milamber.'

They walked out of the room and made for the pattern room. Pug said, "In the glade by the pool is the means for my return home. I would it remained undisturbed until I close it.'

'it is done. I will instruct the grounds keepers to allow no-one in the glade.'

At the door Almorella said, 'Where are you bound, Milamber?'

'That I will not tell you, for what you do not know cannot be forced from you. You are already in jeopardy for simply having me under your roof. I will add no more. ' Without further word he led Dominic and Meecham into the pattern room and closed the door behind.

Removing a scroll from his belt pouch, Pug placed it on the centre of a large tile pattern, a depiction of three dolphins. It was sealed with black wax, embossed with a large chop, from the ring of the Great One. "I send a message to a friend. With this symbol upon it, no one

will dare touch it but him to whom it is addressed.' He closed his eyes for a moment, then suddenly the scroll wasn't there. Pug motioned Dominic and Meecham to stand next to him on the pattern. 'Every Great One in the Empire has a pattern in his home. Each is unique, and when it is remembered exactly, a magician can transport himself or send an object to it. In a few cases, a location that is very familiar, such as the kitchen at Crydee where I worked as a boy, might serve as well as a pattern. It is usual to will a gong to sound, announcing our arrival, though I shall avoid that this time, I think. Come.' He reached out and gripped each of them, closed his eyes. and incanted. There seemed to be a sudden blur and the room appeared to change about them. Dominic said, 'What . . .?' then realized they had transported to another place. He looked down at a different pattern, resembling an ornamental flower of red and yellow. Pug said, 'The one' who lives here is brother to one of my old teachers, for whom the pattern was emplaced. That Great One called here often. I hope we may still find friends here.'

Pug went to the door and slid it slightly ajar. He peered up and down the corridor. Dominic stepped up behind him. 'How far did we travel?'

'Eight hundred miles and more.'

'Amazing,' Dominic said softly.

Pug led them swiftly to another room, where the afternoon sunlight could be seen coming through a window, casting the shadow of the room's lone occupant upon the door. Without announcing himself, Pug slid it open.

Before a writing desk sat an old man, his once powerful body shrunken by age. He squinted at the parchment before him, and his lips moved silently as he read. His robe was a deep blue, simple, but finely made. Pug was shocked, for he remembered this man as a tower despite his advancing years. The last year had taken a toll. The ' man , looked up at the intruders. His eyes grew large as he said, 'Milamber!'

Pug motioned his companions through the door and slid it behind. 'Honours to your house, Lord of the Shinzawai. '

Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai did not rise in greeting. He stared at the former slave who had risen to the rank of great One and said, 'You are under edict, branded traitor. and without honour. Your life is forfeit should you be found.' His tone was cold, his expression hostile.

Pug was taken aback. Of all his allies in the plot to end the Riftwar, Kamatsu had been among the staunchest. ,Kasumi, his son, had carried the Emperor's message of peace to King Rodric.

'Have I caused your offence, Kamatsu?' Pug asked.

'I had a son among those lost when you attempted to entrap the Light of Heaven with your deceit.'

'Your son still lives, Kamatsu. He honours his father and sends affection.' Pug handed Kamatsu the message from Kasumi. The old man peered at it for a long time, reading every character slowly. When he had finished, tears ran unashamedly down his leathery cheeks. 'Can all this be true?' he said.

'It is true. My King had nothing to do with the deception at the truce table. Nor had I a hand in it. That mystery is long in explaining, but first hear of your son. He not only is alive, but is now counted highly in my nation. Our King sought no vengeance upon our former enemies. He granted freedom to all who would serve him. Kasumi and the others are freemen in his army.'

'All?' said Kamatsu incredulously.

'Four thousand men of Kelewan are now soldiers of my King's army. They are counted among the most loyal of his subjects. They bring honour to their families. When King Lyam's life was in danger, the task of guaranteeing his safety was given to your son and his men.' Pride shone in Kamatsu's eyes. "The Tsurani live in a city called LaMut, and fight well against the enemies of our nation. Your son is named Earl of that city, as important a rank as Lord of a family, closer to clan Warchief. He is married to Megan, the daughter of a powerful merchant of Rillanon, and someday you will be a grandfather.'

The old man seemed to gain in strength, he said, 'Tell me of his life.' Pug and Kamatsu began to speak of Kasumi, his life for the last year, and his rise, his meeting Megan just before Lyam's coronation, and their rapid courtship and marriage. For nearly a half hour they spoke, the urgency of Pug's mission forgotten for the moment.

When they were done, Pug said, 'And Hokanu?'

Kasumi asked after his brother.'

'My younger son is well. He patrols the northern frontier against the Thun raiders.'

'Then the Shinzawai rise to greatness on two worlds.' said Pug. 'Alone among Tsurani families can the Shinzawai make that claim.'

Kamatsu said, 'That is a strange thing to contemplate.'

His voice turned serious. 'What has caused your return, Milamber? It is not only to ease an old man's loss, I am certain.'

Pug introduced his companions and then said. 'A dark power rises up against my nation, Kamatsu. We have faced only a part of its might and we seek to understand its nature.'

Kamatsu said, 'What has this to do with your return

here? What cause have you to return?'

'in a vision, one of our seers confronted this dark agency and was addressed in the ancient temple language.' He spoke of Murmandamus and the dark power behind the moredhel.

'How can this be?'

'That is what has caused me to risk a return. I hope to find an answer in the library of the Assembly.'

Kamatsu shook his head. 'You risk much. There is a certain tension within the High Council, beyond what is usual for the Great Game. I suspect we are on the verge of some major upheaval, as this new Warlord seems even more obsessed with controlling the nations than was his uncle.'

Understanding at once the Tsurani subtlety, Pug asked, 'Do you speak of a final schism between Warlord and Emperor?'

With a heavy sigh, the old man nodded. "I fear civil war. Should Ichindar press forward with the certainty he showed to end the Riftwar, Axantucar would be blown away as chaff upon the wind, for the majority of the clans and families still hold the Emperor as supreme, and few trust this new Warlord. But the Emperor has lost much face. For him to have forced the five great clans to the peace table only to be betrayed has robbed him of his moral authority. Axantucar is free to act without opposition. I think this Warlord seeks to unite the two offices. The gold trim on white is not enough for this one. I think he seeks to wear the gold of the Light of Heaven.'

"in the Game of the Council, anything is possible," quoted Pug. 'But look you, all were betrayed at the peace talks.' He spoke of the last message of Macros the Black, reminding Kamatsu of the ancient teachings of the Enemy's attacks upon the nation, and speaking of Macros's fear that the rift would draw that terrible power. 'Such duplicity shows that the Emperor was no more a fool than the rest, but it still does not forgive him the mistake. Yet such a tale may win him a little more support in the High Council - if support has any meaning. '

'You think the Warlord ready to act?'

'Anytime now. He has neutralized the Assembly by having his own pet magicians call its own autonomy into question. Great Ones sit in debate over their own fate. Hochopepa and my brother, Fumita, dare not take a hand in the Great Game at this time. Politically, the Assembly might as well not exist.'

'Then seek allies in the High Council. Tell them this: somehow our two worlds stand linked again by some dark power of Tsurani origin. It moves against the Kingdom. It is power beyond human understanding, perhaps power to challenge the gods themselves. I cannot tell you how I

know, but i feel certain that, should the Kingdom fall, then will Midkemia fall, should Midkemia fall, then surely will Kelewan fall after.'

Kamatsu, Lord of the Shinzawai, former Warchief of the Kanazawai Clan, showed an expression of concern. Softly he said, 'Can it be?'

Pug's expression showed he believed it true. 'it may be I will be captured or killed. If so, I must have allies on the High Council who will speak this cause to the Light of Heaven. It is not my life I fear for, Kamatsu, but the lives of two worlds. If I fail, the Great Ones Hochopepa or Shimone must return to my world with whatever can be learned of this dark power. Will you help?'

Kamatsu rose. 'Of course. Even had you not brought word of Kasumi, even had our doubts about you been true, only a madman would be unwilling to put aside former grievances in light of such warning. I 'will leave at once by fast boat downriver to the Holy City. Where will you be?'

'Seeking help from another. If I am successful, I shall plead my case before the Assembly. No one gains the black robe without having learned to listen before acting. No, my true risk is falling into the Warlord's hands. If you do not hear of me in three days, assume that has come to pass. I will be either dead or captive. Then you must take action. Only silence will aid this Murmandamus. In this you must not fail.'

"I will not fail, Milamber.'

Pug, once known as Milamber, greatest of the Great Ones of Tsuranuanni, rose and bowed. 'We must leave. Honours to your house, Lord of the Shinzawai.'

Kamatsu bowed lower' than was required of his station and said, 'Honours to your house, Great One.'

Hawkers shouted to passing buyers as the sun beat down. The market square at Ontoset was athrong with business. Pug and his companions had taken a place in the section of the plaza set aside for licensed beggars and priests. For three mornings they rose from under the protective wall of the square and spent the day preaching to those willing to stop and listen. Meecham would pass among the small crowds, holding out the beggar's bowl. There was only one temple of Hantukama east of the Holy City of Kentosani - in the city of Yankora. far from Ontoset - so there was little risk of them being discovered by another wandering priest in the short time they would be staying in the city. The order was widely and thinly spread, and many who served had not seen another priest of the order for years.

Pug finished his sermon for the morning and returned to Dominic's side as the monk instructed an injured girl's

mother in proper care for the child. Her broken leg would be fully mended within days. The woman's grateful thanks were all she could give, but Dominic's smile indicated that was sufficient. Meecham joined them, showing several of the tiny gemstones and slivers of metal that served as currency in the Empire. "A man could make a decent living this way."

Pug said, 'You scared them into giving.'

A commotion in the crowd made them all look as a company of horsemen rode past. They wore the green armour of a house known to Pug by reputation, the Hoxaka. They were members of the War Party. Meecham said, 'They've taken to riding, for certain.'

'Like the Tsurani in LaMut,' Pug whispered back. 'It seems once a Tsurani gets over being terrified of horses, he becomes mad for them. I know Kasumi did. Once upon a horse, it was near-impossible to get him off.' It appeared the horse had become accepted in the Empire and cavalry firmly established in the arsenal of Tsurani weapons.

When the horses had passed, another noise made them turn. Standing before them was a heavysset man in black robes, his bald head gleaming in the noonday sun. On every side citizens were bowing and moving away, not wishing to crowd the august presence of a Great One of the Empire. Pug and his companions bowed.

The magician said, 'You three' will come with me.'

Pug made a show of stammering, 'Your will. Great One.' They hurried to follow after.

The black-robed magician walked directly to the nearest building, a leatherworker's establishment. The magician entered and said to the proprietor, "I have need of this building. You may return in an hour."

Without hesitation the owner said, 'Your will, Great One,' and called for his apprentices to join him outside.

In a minute the building was empty except for Pug and his friends.

Pug and Hochopepa embraced. Then the stout magician said, 'Milamber, you are mad to return. When I received your message, I could scarcely believe my senses. Why did you risk sending it through the pattern, and why this meeting in the heart of the city?'

'Pug said, 'Meecham, watch the window.' To Hochopepa he said, 'What better place to hide than in plain sight? You receive messages by the pattern often, and who would think of questioning you about speaking to common priests?' He turned and said, 'These are my companions,' and made the introductions.

Hochopepa swept clear a bench and sat. "I have a thousand questions. How did you manage to return? The magicians who serve the Warlord have been trying to

relocate your homeworld, for the Light of Heaven, may the gods protect him, is determined to avenge the betrayal of the peace conference. And how did you manage to destroy the first rift? And live?' He saw Pug's amusement at his flood of questions and ended, "But most important, why have you returned?"

Pug said, 'There is loose upon my homeworld some dark power of Tsurani origin, an evil thing of dark magic. I seek knowledge, for it is of Kelewan.' Hochopepa looked questioningly at him. "Many strange things occur on' my world, and it is the most elegant answer, Hocho. I hope to discover some clue to the nature of this dark power. And it is a fearful agency.' He went into detail about what had occurred since the first. from explaining the reason for the betrayal, to the attempts on Prince Arutha. to his own interpretation of Rogent's seeing. Hochopepa said, 'This is strange, for we know of no such power upon Kelewan - at least, none I have heard about. One advantage to our organization is that two thousand years of cooperative effort by the Black Robes has rid this world of a great many such menaces. In our lore we know of demon lords and witch-kings, spirits of dark powers and things of evil, all of whom fell before the combined might of the assembly.'

From the window Meecham said, 'Seems you might have missed one.'

Hochopepa appeared taken aback at being addressed by a commoner, then he chuckled. 'Perhaps, or perhaps there is another explanation. I do not know. But,' he said to Pug, 'you have always been a force for social good within the Empire, and I have no doubt that all you have said is truth. I will act as your agent, seeking safe passage to the library, and I will aid in your research. But understand, the Assembly is hamstrung by internal politics. The vote to let you live is by no means a certainty. I shall have to return and lobby. It may take days before I can openly voice the question.'

'But I think I can succeed at this. You raise too many questions to ignore. I will convene a meeting as soon as possible and return for you once I have pleaded your case. Only a madman would fail to heed your warning even should it prove to be something not of this world that plagues your land. At worst you gain a parole to use the library and depart, at best, perhaps a reinstatement. You will have to justify your past actions.'

"I can and will. Hocho.'

Hochopepa left the bench and stood before his old friend. 'it may be we can yet have peace between our nations, Milamber. Should the old wound somehow be healed. we could benefit both worlds. I, for one, would love to visit this academy you build and meet this seer



who predicts the future and this child who speaks with the mind.'

"I have many things I would share, Hocho. The making of controllable rifts is but a tenth part of it. But all that later. Go now.'

Pug began to guide Hochopepa to the door, but something in Meecham's pose caught his eye. It was too still and awkward. Dominic had been closely following the magicians' conversation and had not seemed to notice any change in the franklin. Pug studied Meecham a second, then shouted, 'A spell!'

Pug moved towards the window and touched Meecham. The tall man was unable to move. Past him Pug could see men running towards the building. Before Pug could react and incant a spell of protection, the door exploded inwards with a thunderous sound, knocking everyone inside to the floor and stunning them momentarily. Senses reeling, Pug tried to regain his feet, but his ears rang from the sound and his vision blurred. As he staggered upright, an object was hurled in through the door. It was a ball-like object the size of a man's fist. Pug again tried to establish a spell of protection around the room, but the sphere emitted a blinding orange light. Pug's eyes felt seared and he closed them, breaking the pattern of his spell. He began again, but the object made a high-pitched whine, which seemed somehow to drain away his strength. He heard someone hit the floor and couldn't tell if Hochopepa or Dominic had tried to rise and failed or if Meecham had toppled. Pug fought against the magic of the sphere with all his considerable might, but he was off balance and confused. He staggered to the door, trying to get away from the object, for once free of its debilitating effects he could easily save his friends. But the unknown spell was too quick and strong. At the threshold of the shop he collapsed. He fell to his knees, blinking to clear the double vision the sphere or explosion had inflicted upon him. He could make out men approaching the building from across the plaza. They wore the armour of the Warlord's Imperial Whites, his personal honour guard. Sinking downwards into darkness, Pug could see that the one who led them wore a black robe. Pug could hear the magician's voice, as if coming from a vast distance through the ringing in his ears, saying, 'Bind them.'

16

Moraelin

Mist blew through the canyon.  
Arutha signalled a halt, Jimmy peered downwards

through the blowing moisture. A waterfall thundered beside the trail that was their route towards Moraelin. Now they were properly in the Great Northern Mountains, in that area between the elver forests and the Northlands. Moraelin lay higher in the mountains, in a rocky, barren place just below the crest. They waited while Martin scouted the pass ahead. Since leaving their elver guides they had become a military mission in enemy-held lands. They could trust Arutha's talisman to hide them from Murmandamus's scrying magic, but that he knew they would soon come to Moraelin was beyond question. It was never to be a question of if they would encounter his minions, but simply when.

Martin returned, signalling that the way ahead was clear, then he put up his hand for a halt again. He dashed past the others, heading back down the trail. As he passed Baru and Roald, he motioned for them to follow. They jumped down from their mounts, and Laurie and Jimmy took the reins. Arutha looked back, wondering what Martin had seen, while Jimmy kept eyes ahead. Martin and the others returned, another figure walking with them. Arutha relaxed when he saw it was the elf Galain.

The oppressive nature of their journey was such that when they spoke, it was in hushed tones, lest echoes in the hills betray them. Arutha greeted the elf. "We thought you not coming."

Galain replied, "The Warleader sent me after you with this intelligence but a few hours after you departed. After he was found, the gwali Apalla said two things of importance. First, a beast of some ferocious nature unclear from the gwali's description inhabits the area near the lake. Tomas pleads caution. Second, there is another entrance to Moraelin. He felt it of sufficient import to dispatch me after." Galain smiled. "Besides, I thought it might also prove useful to see if you were being followed."

"Were we?"

Galain nodded. "Two moredhel scouts cut your trail less than a mile north of our forests. They were marking 'your way, and one surely would have run ahead to warn when you got close to Moraelin. I would have joined you earlier, but I needed to be certain neither could escape to give warning. Now there is no such risk.' Martin nodded, knowing the elf would have killed them both suddenly and without chance for alarm. 'There are no signs of others.'

Martin asked, 'Do you return?'

'Tomas gave me discretion. It is not of much use to go back at this point. I may as well travel with you. I may not pass over the Tracks of the Hopeless, but until that

portal is reached, another bow may prove useful.'

'Welcome, ' said Arutha.

Martin mounted and, without words, Galain ran on ahead to scout the way. They moved gradually upwards, the falls chilling them despite the early summer warmth.

At these heights hail and occasionally snow were not uncommon except in the hottest months of summer, still weeks away. The nights had been damp, though not as bitter as had been feared, for they made cold camp. The elves had given them trail rations, dried meat and hard cakes of nut flour and dried fruit - nourishing but cheerless fare.

The trail led along the face of the cliffs, until it came

out in a high meadow, overlooking the valley. A silver, sparkling lake lapped its shores gently in the late afternoon light, the only sound being the singing of birds and the rustling of the wind in the trees. Jimmy looked about, 'How can . . . how can the day be so nice when we move towards nothing but trouble?'

Roald said, "One thing about soldiering: if you're going to risk dying, there's no sense doing it wet, cold, and hungry unless absolutely necessary. Enjoy the sunshine, lad. It's a gift."

They watered their horses. After a welcome rest, they continued onwards. The path Galin had spoken about, north of the lake, was easily found but steep and difficult to negotiate. As sunset approached, Galain returned with news of a promising cave in which they might safely build a small fire. "It is curved, twice, and the air moves upwards through fissures that will carry smoke away. Martin, if we leave now, we might have time to hunt game near the lake."

Arutha said, "Don't be overly long in the hunt. Signal your approach with that raven's honk you do so well, or you'll be greeted by some sword points."

Martin nodded once, giving the reins of his horse to Jimmy. He said,

"Two hours after sunset at the latest,

And he and Galane were heading back down the trail towards the lake.

Roald and Baru took point, and after a five-minute ride found the cave Galain had mentioned. It was flat, wide, and free of other occupants. Jimmy explored back and found it narrow after a hundred feet, so that unexpected visitors would have to come through the mouth.

Laurie and Baru gathered wood and the first fire in days

was built, though it was a small one. Jimmy and Arutha settled in with the others, waiting for Martin and Galain.

Martin and Galain lay in wait. They had constructed a natural-looking blind, using brush gathered from other parts of the woods. They were certain they could observe any animal coming down to the lake's edge without being seen. They had lain downwind from the lake, neither moving, for half an hour when the sound of hooves on the rocks sounded from below the cliff.

, Both nocked arrows, but otherwise remained silent. Into the meadow from the trail below rode a dozen men, dressed in black. Each wore the strange dragon armour seen at Sarth, and their heads moved constantly, as if they looked for something - or someone. Then behind them came Murad, his cheek still showing the additional scar Arutha had given him on the road to Sarth.

the black Slayers reined in and watered their mounts, in the saddle. Murad seemed relaxed but alert. for ten minutes they let the horses drink. When they were finished watering their horses, they rode out, turning up the trail after Arutha's band.

When they were out of sight, Martin said, "They must come in between Yabon and Stone Mountain to avoid your forests. Tathar is correct in his assumption that they will move to Moraelin to wait for us."

Galain said, "Few things in life disturb me, Martin, but those black Slayers are one."

"You're just now coming to that conclusion?"

"You humans are given to overreaction upon occasion."

Galain looked to where the riders had gone.

Martin said, "They will overtake Arutha and the others shortly. If this Murad can track, then they will find the cave ."

Galain stood. "Let us hope the Hadati knows his trail craft. If not, at least we will be attacking from the rear."

Martin smiled a grim smile. "That will certainly be of comfort to those in the cave. Thirteen against five, and only one way in or out."

Without further comment, they shouldered their bows and began to lope up the trail behind the moredhel.

'Riders come,' said Baru. Jimmy was instantly covering the fire with dirt, carried in against the need. That way the fire would die quickly without smoke. Then Laurie touched Jimmy on the arm and motioned that he should come to the rear of the cave to help quiet the horses. Roald, Baru, and Arutha moved forward to where they could, they hoped, see out of the cave mouth without being seen.

The evening looked murky dark after the bright fire,

but soon their eyes adjusted and they could see the riders passing by the cave. The rearmost pulled up a moment before the others answered some silent command and ' halted. He looked about, as if sensing something nearby. Arutha fingered his talisman, hoping the moredhel was simply cautious and not feeling his presence.

A cloud passed from before the little moon, the only one up this early, and the vista before the cave became slightly more illuminated. Baru stiffened at sight of Murad, for the hillman could now clearly see the moredhel. He had begun to draw his sword when Arutha's hand gripped his wrist. The Prince hissed in the hillman's ear, "Not yet!"

Baru's body trembled as he struggled against his desire to avenge his family's death and complete his Bloodquest. He burned to attack the moredhel without regard for his own safety, but there were his companions to consider. Then Roald gripped the back of the Hadati's neck and put his cheek against Baru's, so he could speak into his ear almost without sound. 'if the twelve in black cut you down before you reach Murad, what honour do you to 'your village's memory?'

Baru's sword slipped noiselessly back into its sheath. Silently they watched as Murad surveyed the surroundings. His eyes fell on the mouth of the cave. He peered at the entrance, and for a moment Arutha could feel the scar-faced moredhel's eyes upon him. Then they were moving again . . . then they were gone.

Arutha crept forward until he hung out of the cave, watching for signs the riders were returning. Suddenly a voice behind said, "I thought a cave bear might have run you all out of there.'

Arutha spun, his heart racing and his sword coming out of its scabbard, to find Martin and Galain standing behind. He put up his weapon and said, "I could have run you through. '

the others appeared and Galain said, "They should have investigated, but they seemed determined to be somewhere in a hurry. So we might do well to follow. I'll keep them under watch and mark the trail.'

, Arutha said, 'What if another band of Dark Brothers comes along? Won't they find your trail markings?'

Only Martin will recognize my trail markings.

No southern Moredhel can track like an elf. He shouldered his bow and began to run after the riders.

As' he vanished into the night's gloom, Laurie said, "and if the Dark Brothers are forest dwellers?'

Galain's voice came back out of the dark: "I'll have about as much to worry about as you will.'

After Galain was out of earshot, Martin said, "I wish he were only joking.'

Galain ran back down the trail, motioning towards a stand of trees off to the left of the road. They hurried to the trees and dismounted. They led the mounts down into a draw, as deep into the woods as possible. Galain whispered, "A patrol comes." He, Martin, and Arutha hurried back to the edge of the trees where they could spy anyone on the trail.

A few minutes passed with agonizing slowness; then a dozen riders came down the mountain road, a mixed band of moredhel and men. The moredhel were wearing cloaks and were clearly forest dwellers from the south. They rode past without pause, and when they were out of sight, Martin said, "Renegades now flock to Murmandamus's banner." He almost spat as he said, "There are few I'd gladly kill, but humans who would serve the moredhel for gold are among them."

As they returned to the others, Galain said to Arutha, "There is a camp athwart the road a mile above here. They are clever, for it is a difficult passage around the camp, and we would need to leave your horses here. It is that or ride through the camp."

"How far to the lake is it?" asked the Prince.

"Only a few miles. But once past the camp we rise above the tree line and there is little cover, save down among the rocks. It will be a slow passage, and better done at night. There are bound to be scouts around and many guards on the road to the bridge."

"What about the second entrance the gwali told of?"

"If we understood rightly, by descending down into the

Tracks of the Hopeless, you'll find a cave or fissure that will lead through the rock up to the surface of the plateau near the lake."

Arutha considered. "Let us leave our mounts here."

Laurie said, with a faint smile, "Might as well tether the horses to the trees. If we die, we won't need them."

Roald said, "My old captain used to get downright short with soldiers who harped on death before a battle."

"Enough!" said Arutha. He took a step away, then turned. "I've been worrying this over and over. I've come this far and I'll continue, but . . . you may leave now if you wish, and I'll not object." He looked at Laurie and Jimmy, then Baru and Roald. He was answered by silence.

Arutha looked from face to face, then nodded brusquely. "Very well. Tie up the horses and lighten your packs; We walk."

The moredhel watched the trail below, well lit by large and middle moons, as little moon rose. He perched atop an outcropping of rock, nestled behind a boulder. He

was positioned so he would be unobserved by any coming up the trail.

Martin and Galain took aim at the moredhel's back as Jimmy slipped behind the rocks. They would try to win past without being seen, but if the moredhel twitched in the wrong direction, Martin and Galain meant to see him dead before he could speak. Jimmy had gone first, as he was judged the least likely to make noise. Next came Baru, and the hillman moved through the rocks with the practised ease of one mountain-born. Laurie and Roald moved very slowly, and Martin wondered if he could hold his target for the week it was taking them to pass. Then at last Arutha slipped past, the light breeze making enough noise to disguise the faint scuff of boot upon rock as he stepped down into a shallow depression. He scampered along until he joined with the others, out of sight of the sentry. Within seconds Martin, then Galain, followed, and the elf went past to take point again. Martin signalled he would go after, and Arutha motioned agreement. In a moment Laurie and Roald followed. Just before he turned to follow, Jimmy put his face before Martin and Arutha's and whispered, 'When we get back, the first thing I'm going to do is scream my bloody head off.' With a playful swat, Martin sent him along. Arutha looked at Martin and silently mouthed the words, 'Me too.' Then the Prince was going down the wash. Martin took a last backwards glance, then followed.

Silently they lay in a depression near the road, a small ridge of rock hiding them from the passing moredhel horsemen. Reluctant even to breathe, they remained motionless as the riders seemed to pause in their slow passage. For a long, torturous moment, Arutha and his companions feared discovery. Just as every nerve seemed to scream for action, as every muscle demanded motion, the riders continued along their patrol. With a sigh of relief close to a sob, Arutha rolled over and discovered the trail empty. With a nod to Galain, Arutha ordered a resumption of the trek. The elf was off along the defile, and the others slowly rose and followed.

The night wind blew bitter along the face of the mountains. Arutha sat back against the rocks, looking where Martin pointed. Galain hugged the opposite wall of the crevice they crouched in. They had taken a rise over a crest to the east of the trail, seeming to take them away from their destination, but a necessary detour to avoid increasing moredhel activity. Now they looked down upon a broad canyon, in the middle of which a high plateau rose upwards. In the centre of the plateau a small lake could be seen. To their left they could see the trail returning as it ran past the edge of the canyon, then

disappeared over the crest of the mountains farther up clearly shown in the light of all three moons.

Where the trail came closest to the edge of the canyons twin towers of stone had been erected. Another pair stood opposite on the plateau. Between them a narrow suspension bridge swayed in the wind. On top of all four towers torches burned, their flames dancing madly in the wind. Movement along the bridge and atop the towers told them the entire area around the plateau was heavily guarded. Arutha leant back against the rocks. 'Moraelin.' Galain said, "Indeed. It appears they feared you might bring an army with you.'

Martin said, "It was a thought.

Arutha said, 'You were right about its comparing to the road to Sarth. This would have been almost as bad. We'd have lost a thousand men reaching this point - if we could have got this far. Across the bridge, single file it would have been mass slaughter.'

' Martin asked, 'Can you see that black shape across the .? lake?'

'A building of some sort,' said Galain. He looked perplexed. "It is unusual to see a building, that building, any building, though the Valheru were capable of anything. This is a place of power. That must be a Valheru building, though I've never heard of its like before.'

'Where shall I find Silverthorn?' asked Arutha.

Galain said, 'Most of the stories say it needs water, so it grows on the edge of the lake. Nothing more specific.'

' Martin said, 'Now, as to gaining entrance.'

Galain signalled them away from the front end of the crevice, and they returned to where the others waited. The elf knelt and drew in the ground. "We are here, with ridge here. Somewhere down at the base is a small or large fissure, large enough for a gwali to run through, so I'd guess it would be big enough for you to get through. It might be a chimney in the rock you can climb up, or it might be connecting caves. But Apalla was emphatic that he and his people had spent some time on that plateau. They didn't stay long because of the ""bad thing", but he remembered enough to convince Tomas and Calin he wasn't confused about being here. 'I've spotted a broken facing on the other side of the canyon, so we'll work along past the bridge entrance until we have that black building between myself and the bridge guards. You'll find what appears to be the start of a way down there. Even if you can only get a short way down, you can lower yourself with ropes. Then I'll pull them up and hide them. '

Jimmy said, 'That'll be really handy when we want to climb back up.

Galain said, "At sundown tomorrow I'll lower the ropes



again. I'll leave them down until just before sunrise. Then I'll pull them up again. I'll lower them again the next night. I think I can stay hidden in the crack in the broken facing. I may have to scamper into the brush, but I'll stay free of any moredhel who are looking about.' He didn't sound too convinced. 'if you need the ropes sooner than that,' he added with a smile, "simply shout.'

Martin looked at Arutha. "As long as they don't know we're here, we have a chance. They still look to the south, thinking us somewhere between Elvandar and here. As long as we don't give ourselves away . . . '

Arutha said, "It's as good a plan as I can come up with. Let's go.'

Quickly, for they needed to be down in the canyon before sunrise, they moved among the rocks, seeking to reach the far side of the canyon rim.

Jimmy hugged the face of the plateau, hiding in the shadow below the bridge. The rim of the canyon was some hundred and fifty feet above them, but there was still a chance of being seen. A narrow black crack in the face of the plateau presented itself. Jimmy turned his head to Laurie and whispered, "of course. It has to be right under the bridge. '

'Let's just hope they don't bother to look down.'

Word was passed back, and Jimmy entered the fissure. It was a tight squeeze for only ten feet, then opened into a cave. Turning back towards the others, he said, "Pass a torch and flint through.'

As he took them, he heard a movement behind him. He hissed a warning and spun, his dirk almost flying into his hand. The faint light coming from behind was more a hindrance than a help, for it caused most of the cave to be inky black to his eyes. Jimmy closed his eyes, relying on his other senses. He backed up and towards the crack, saying a silent prayer to the god of thieves.

From ahead he heard a scrabbling sound, like claws on rock, and heard a slow, heavy breathing. Then he remembered the gwali talking of a 'bad thing' that ate one of his tribe.

Again came the noise, this time much closer, and Jimmy wished fervently for a light. He moved to the right as he heard Laurie speak his name in a questioning tone. The boy hissed, 'There's some kind of animal in here. Jimmy could hear Laurie say something to the others and the scramble as the singer moved back, away from the cave entrance. Faintly he could hear someone, perhaps Roald, saying, 'Martin's coming.

Holding on to the knife with fierce intensity, Jimmy thought to himself, yes, if it comes to fighting animals, I'd send in Martin, too. He expected the large Duke of Crydee to leap in beside him at any moment and wondered

what was taking so long.

Then there was sudden movement towards the boy and he leapt back and up, instinctively, almost climbing a rock face. Something struck his lower leg, and he could hear the snapping of jaws. Jimmy turned in midair and, using his native abilities, tucked and rolled with the fall, coming down on something that wasn't rock. Without hesitation, Jimmy lashed out with his dirk, feeling the point dig into something. He continued to roll off the back of the creature while a reptilian hiss and snarl filled the cave. The boy twisted as he came to his feet, pulling the dirk free. The creature spun, moving quickly, almost as quickly as Jimmy, who leapt away from the creature, blindly, and struck his head against a low-hanging outcropping of rock.

Stunned, Jimmy fell hard against the wall as the creature launched itself again, again missing by only a little.

Jimmy, half stunned, reached out with his left hand and found his arm wrapping around the thing's neck. Like the legendary man riding the tiger, Jimmy couldn't release his hold, for the creature could not reach him as long as he held fast. Jimmy sat, letting the animal drag him around the cave, while he stabbed repeatedly at the leathery hide. With little leverage, his blows were mostly ineffective. The creature thrashed about, and Jimmy was 'battered against the rock walls and scraped as he was dragged about the cave. Jimmy felt panic rising up inside, for the animal seemed to be gaining in fury, and his arm felt as if it would be torn from his shoulder. Tears of fear ran down the boy's cheeks, and he hammered at the creature in terror. 'Martin,' he half shouted, half gulped, 'Where was he? Jimmy felt with sudden certainty that he was at last at the end of his vaunted luck. For the first time he could remember, he felt helpless, for there was nothing he could do to extricate himself from this situation. He felt himself go sick to his stomach and numb all over and, with dread certainty, felt fear for his life: not the exhilarating thrill of danger during a chase across the Thieves' Highway, but a horrible numbing sleepiness as if he wished to curl up in a ball and end it all.

The creature leapt about, banging Jimmy against the wall repeatedly, and suddenly was still. Jimmy continued to stab at it for a moment, then a voice said, 'It's dead.'

The still-woozy thief opened his eyes and saw Martin standing over him. Baru and Roald stood behind, the mercenary with a lit torch. Next to the boy lay a lizardlike creature, seven feet in length, looking like nothing as much as an iguana with a crocodile's jaws, Martin's hunting knife through the back of its skull. Martin knelt before Jimmy. 'You all right?'

Jimmy scuttled away from the thing, still showing signs

of panic. When it penetrated his fear-clouded senses that he was unhurt, the boy shook his head vigorously. 'No, I'm not all right.' He wiped away the tearstains on his face and said, 'No, damn it all, I'm not.' Then, with tears again coming, he said, 'Damn it. I thought I . . .'

Arutha came through the fissure last and took stock of the boy's condition. He moved next to the boy, who leant tearfully against the rock wall. Gently placing his hand upon Jimmy's arm, he said, "It's over. You're all right.'

His voice betraying a mixture of anger and fear, Jimmy said, 'I thought it had me. Damn, I've never been so scared in my life.'

Martin said, "If you're going to be scared of something at long last, Jimmy, this beastie is a good choice. Look at the jaws on it.'

Jimmy shivered. Arutha said, "We all get scared, Jimmy. You've just finally found something to be truly fearful of.'

Jimmy nodded. "I hope it doesn't have a big brother about.'

Arutha said, 'Did you sustain any wounds?'

Jimmy took a quick inventory. 'Just bruises.' Then he winced. 'A lot of bruises.'

Baru said, "A rock serpent. Good-sized one. You did well killing it with that knife, Lord Martin.'

In the light the creature looked respectable, but nothing like the horror Jimmy had imagined in the dark. "That's the bad thing"?'

Martin said, 'Most likely. As bad as it looked to you, imagine what it looks like to a three-foot-tall gwali.' He held up his torch as Laurie and Arutha entered. 'Let's see what this place is like.'

They were in a narrow but high-ceilinged chamber, mostly limestone, from its look. The floor climbed slightly as it moved away from the fissure that led outside.

Jimmy appeared ragged, but went to the fore, taking Martin's torch and saying, 'I'm still the expert at climbing into places I'm not welcome.'

They moved quickly through a series of chambers, each slightly larger and located higher up than the others. The connecting chambers had an odd appearance and strange feel to them, somehow disquieting. The plateau was large enough for them to move for some time without much sense of moving upwards, until Jimmy said, 'We move in a spiral. I'll swear we're now above the place where Martin killed that rock serpent.'

They continued their progress until they came to an apparent dead end. Looking about, Jimmy pointed upwards. Above their heads by three feet was an opening in the roof. 'A chimney,' said Jimmy. "You climb up by

putting your back to one side and feet to the other.'

'What if it widens too much?' asked Laurie.

'Then it's usual to come back down. The rate of descent is up to you. I suggest you do it slowly.'

Martin said, 'if the gwali can get up there, we should be able.'

Roald said, 'Beggin' Your Grace's pardon, but do you think you could swing through the trees like them, too?'

Ignoring the remark, Martin said, 'Jimmy?'

'Yes, I'll go first. I'll not end my days because one of you lost his grip and fell on me. Keep clear of the opening until I call down.'

With assistance from Martin, Jimmy easily made it into the chimney. It was a good fit, with just enough room to negotiate easily. The others, especially Martin and Baru, would find it a tight fit, but they would squeeze through. Jimmy quickly made it to the top, about thirty feet from the chamber below, and found another cave. Without light he couldn't tell its size, but faint echoes of his breathing told him it was a good size. He lowered himself down just far enough to call the come ahead, then scrambled up to the lip.

By the time the first head, Roald's, Popped into view, Jimmy had a torch lit. Quickly they all climbed up the chimney. The cave was large, easily two hundred feet across. The roof averaged a full twenty-five feet high. Stalagmites rose from the floor, some joining together with the stalactites above to form limestoae pillars. The cave was a forest of stone. In the distance several other caves and passages could be seen.

Martin looked about. 'How high do you judge we've climbed, Jimmy?'

'No more than seventy feet. Not yet halfway.'

'Now which way?' asked Arutha.

Jimmy said, 'Nothing for it except to try them one at a time.'

Picking one of the many exits, he marched towards it.

After hours of searching, Jimmy turned to Laurie and said, 'The surface.'

Word was passed and Arutha squeezed up past the singer to look. Above the boy's head was a narrow passage, little more than a crack. Arutha could see light above, almost blinding after the faintly lit passages. With a nod, Jimmy climbed up until he blocked out the brilliance above.

When he returned, he said, 'It comes out in an outcropping of rocks. We're about a hundred yards from the bridge side of the black building. It's a big thing, two storeys tall.'

'Any guards?'

"None I could see.'

Arutha considered, then said, 'We'll wait until dark.

Jimmy, can you hang close to the surface and listen!'

"There's a ledge,' said the boy and scrambled back upwards. Arutha sat and the others did likewise, waiting for darkness to come.

Jimmy tensed and relaxed muscles to avoid cramping. The top of the plateau was deathly silent, except for an occasional sound carried by the wind. Mostly he heard a stray word or the sounds of boots coming from the direction of the bridge. Once he thought he heard a strange, low sound coming from the black building, but he couldn't be certain. The sun had dipped beneath the horizon, although the sky still glowed. It was certainly two hours after normal suppertime, but this high on the face of the mountains, this close to Midsummer. and this far north, the sun set long after it did in Krondor. Jimmy reminded himself that he had worked jobs before where he'd had to skip meals, but somehow that didn't stop his stomach from demanding attention.

At last it was dark enough. Jimmy, for one, was glad, and it seemed the others shared his feelings. Something about this place brought them to the edge of outright agitation. Even Martin had several times been heard muttering curses at the need to wait. No, there was something alien about this place, and it was a subtle sort of effect they were feeling. Jimmy knew he wouldn't feel secure again until this place was miles behind him and a dim memory. Jimmy climbed out and kept watch while Martin came

next, followed by the others. By agreement they split up into three groups: Baru with Laurie, Roald with Martin and Jimmy with the Prince. They would scout the lakeshore for the plant, and as soon as one found it he would return to the crack in the rocks, waiting down below for his companions.

Arutha and Jimmy were slated to move towards the big black building, and by agreement had decided to begin their search behind the building. It seemed wise to check for guards before searching near the ancient Valheru edifice. It was impossible to know the'moredhel attitude towards the place. They might hold it in similar awe to the elves and refuse to enter, give it wide berth until some ceremony, as if it were a shrine, or they might be inside the building in numbers.

Slipping through the dark, Jimmy reached the edge of the building and hugged it. The stones felt unusually smooth. Jimmy ran his hand over them and discovered they were textured like marble. Arutha waited, weapons ready, while Jimmy did a quick circumnavigation of the

building. 'No one in sight,' he whispered, "except at the bridge towers.'

'inside?' Arutha hissed.

Jimmy said, 'Don't know. It's a big place, but only one door. Want to look?' He hoped the Prince would say no. 'Yes.'

Jimmy led Arutha down along the wall and around the corner, until he came to the solitary door to the large building. Above it was a half-circle window, with a faint light showing. Jimmy signalled for Arutha to give him a boost, and the young thief scampered up to the cornice above the door. He gripped it and pulled himself up to peek through the window.

Jimmy peered about. Below him, behind the door, was an ante-room of some sort, with a stone slab floor.

Beyond, double doors opened into darkness. Jimmy noticed something strange about the wall below the window. The exterior stone was only facing.

Jimmy jumped back down. 'There's nothing I can see from the window.'

"Nothing?' 'There's a passage into the darkness, that's all, no sign

of any guards.' 'Let's start looking around the lake's edge, but keep an

eye on this building. Jimmy agreed and they headed down towards the lake.

The building was beginning to make his "something's odd" bump itch, but he shoved aside any distraction and concentrated on the search.

Hours were spent stalking the shore. Few water plants lined the lake's edge, the plateau was almost devoid of flora. In the distance there would be an occasional faint rustling sound, which Arutha supposed came from one of the other pairs who searched.

When the sky became grey, Jimmy alerted Arutha to the coming dawn. Giving up in disgust, the Prince accompanied the boy thief back to the crevice. Laurie and Baru were already there and Martin and Roald joined them a few minutes later. All reported no sight of Silverthorn. Arutha remained silent, turning slowly until his back was to the others. Then he clenched his fist, looking as if he had been struck a terrible blow. All eyes were on him as he stared away into the darkness of the cave, his profile etched in relief by the faint light from above, and all saw tears upon his cheeks. Suddenly he spun to confront his companions. Hoarsely he whispered, "It must be here.' He looked at each of them

in turn, and they glimpsed something in his eyes: a depth of feeling, a

sense of overwhelming loss that caused them to share his

dread. All of them saw suffering and something dying. If there was no Silverthorn, Anita was lost.

Martin shared his brother's pain, and more, for in this instant he saw his father, in those quiet moments before Arutha had been old enough to know the depths of Borric's loss of his Lady Catherine. The elver-taught hunter felt his own chest constrict at the thought of his brother reliving those lonely nights before the hearth, beside an empty chair, with only a portrait over the fire to gaze upon. Of the three brothers, only Martin had glimpsed the profound bitterness that had haunted their ~father's every waking moment. If Anita died, Arutha's heart and joy might well die with her. Unwilling to surrender hope, Martin whispered, "It will be here somewhere. '

Jimmy added, 'There is one place we haven't looked.'

Arutha said, "Inside that building.' Martin said,

"Then there's only one thing to do.'

Jimmy hated to hear himself say, "One of us must get inside and take a look.' 17

Warlord

The cell stank.

pug stirred and found his hands tethered to the wall with needrahide chains. The skin of the stolid, six-legged Tsurani beast of burden had been treated to almost the hardness of steel and was anchored firmly to the wall. Pug's head ached from the encounter with the strange magic-disrupting device. But there was another irritation. He fought off his mental sluggishness and looked at the manacles. As he began to incant a spell that would cause the chains to change to insubstantial gases, a sudden 'wrongness occurred. He could put no other name to it but a wrongness. His spell would not work. Pug sat back "against the wall, knowing the cell had been blanketed by some ensorcellment neutralizing any other magic. Of course, he thought: how else does one keep a magician in jail?

Pug looked about the room. It was a dark pit of a cell with only a little light coming through a small barred opening high in the door. Something small and busy bustled through the straw near Pug's foot. He kicked and it scurried off. The walls were damp, so he judged that he and his companions were below ground. He had no Way of telling how long they had been here, nor had he any idea where they were;' they could be anywhere upon the world of Kelewan.

Meecham and Dominic were chained to the wall opposite Pug, while to his right Hochopepa Was likewise bound. Pug knew at once that the Empire rested upon a

fine balancing point for the Warlord to risk bringing harm to Hochopepa. To capture a denounced renegade was one thing, but to incarcerate a Great One of the Empire was another. By rights, a Great One should be immune to the dictates of the Warlord. Besides the Emperor, a Great One was the only possible challenge to the Warlord's rule. Kamatsu had been correct. The Warlord was nearing some major ploy or offensive in the Game of the Council, for the imprisonment of Hochopepa showed contempt for any possible opposition.

Meecham groaned and slowly looked up. "My head," he mumbled. Finding himself chained, he tugged experimentally at his bonds. "Well," he said, looking at Pug, 'what now?'

Pug looked back and shook his head. "We wait."

It was a long wait, perhaps three or four hours. When someone appeared, it was suddenly. Abruptly the door had swung open and a black-robed magician entered, followed by a soldier of the Imperial Whites. Hochopepa nearly spat as he said, "Ergoran! are you mad? Release me at once!"

The magician motioned for the soldier to release Pug. He said to Hochopepa, "I do what I do for the Empire. You consort with our enemies, fat one. I will bring word to the Assembly of your duplicity when we have finished with our punishment of this false magician."

Pug was quickly herded outside and the magician named Ergoran said, "Milamber, your display at the Imperial Games a year ago has earned you some respect enough to ensure you do not wreak any more havoc upon those around you." Two soldiers fastened rare and costly metal bracelets upon his wrists. "The wards placed in this dungeon prevent any spell from operating within. Once you are outside the dungeon, these bracelets will cancel your powers." He motioned for the guards to bring pug and one pushed him from behind.

Pug knew better than to waste time on Ergoran. Of all those magicians called the Warlord's pets, he had been among the most rabid. He was one of the few magicians who believed that the Assembly should be an arm of the ruling body of the Empire, the High Council. It was supposed by some who knew him that Ergoran's ultimate goal was to see the Assembly become the High Council. It had been rumoured that while the hot-tempered almecho had publicly ruled, as often as not Ergoran had been the one behind him deciding the policy of the War Party. A long flight of stairs brought Pug into sunlight. After the darkness of the cell he was blinded for a moment. As he was pushed along through the courtyard of some immense building, his eyes quickly adjusted. He was taken up a broad flight of stairs, and as he climbed, Pug



Looked over his shoulder. He could see enough landmarks to know where he was. He saw the river Gagajin, which ~' from the mountains called the High Wall down to the city of Jamar. It was the major north-south thoroughfare for the Empire's central provinces. Pug was in the Holy City itself, Kentosani, the capital of the Empire of Tsuranuanni. And from the dozens of white-armoured guards, he knew he was in the Warlord's palace.

Pug was pushed along through a long hall until he reached a central chamber. The stone walls ended, and a rigid, painted wood-and-hide door was slid aside. A personal council chamber was where the Warlord of the Empire chose to interrogate his prisoner.

Another magician stood near the centre of the room, waiting upon the pleasure of a man who sat reading a scroll. The second magician was one Pug knew only slightly, Elgahar. Pug realized he could expect no aid here, even for Hochopepa, for Elgahar was Ergoran's brother, magic talent had run deep in their family. Elgahar had always seemed to take his lead from his brother.

The man sitting upon a pile of cushions was of middle years, wearing a white robe with a single golden band trimming the neck and sleeves. Remembering Almecho, the last Warlord, Pug couldn't think of a more striking contrast. This man, Axantucar, was the antithesis of his uncle in appearance. While Almecho had been a bullnecked, stocky man, a warrior in his manner, this man was more like a scholar or teacher. His wire-thin body made him look the ascetic. His features were almost delicate. Then he lifted his gaze up from the parchment he had been reading and Pug could see the resemblance: this man, like his uncle, had the same mad hunger for power in his eyes.

Slowly putting away his scroll, the Warlord said, 'Milamber, you show courage, if not prudence, in returning. You will of course be executed, but before we have you hung, we would like to know one thing: why have you returned?'

(Upon my homeworld a power grows, a dark and evil presence that seeks to advance its cause, and that cause is the destruction of my homeland.)

The Warlord seemed interested and motioned for Pug to continue. Pug told all he knew, completely and without embellishment or exaggeration. 'Through magic means I have determined that this thing is of Kelewan, somehow the fates of both worlds are again intertwined.'

When he was finished, the Warlord said, 'You spin an interesting tale.' Ergoran appeared to brush aside Pug's story, but Elgahar looked genuinely troubled. The Warlord went on, 'Milamber, it is truly a shame you were

taken from us during the betrayal. Had you remained, we might have found employment for you as a storyteller. A great power of darkness, aborning from some forgotten recess within our Empire. What a wonderful tale.' The man's smile vanished and he leant forward, elbow upon knee, as he looked at Pug. 'Now, to the truth. This shabby nightmare you spin is but a weak attempt to frighten me into ignoring your true reasons for returning. The Blue Wheel Party and its allies are on the verge of collapse in the High Council. That is why you return, for those who counted you as ally before are desperate, knowing the utter domination of the War Party to be all but a fact. You and the fat one are again in league with those who betrayed the Alliance for War during the invasion of your homeworld. You fear the new order of things we represent. Within days I shall announce the end of the High Council, and you have come to thwart that event, true? I don't know what you have in mind, but we shall have the truth from you, if not now, then soon. And you shall name those who stand arrayed against us.

'And we will have the means of your return. Once the Empire is secure under my rule, then shall we return to your world and quickly do what should have been done under my uncle.'

Pug looked from face to face and knew the truth. Pug had met and spoken with Rodric, the mad King. The Warlord was not as mad as the King had been, but there was no doubt that he was not entirely sane. And behind him stood one who betrayed little, but just enough, for Pug to understand. Ergoran was the power to be feared here, for he was the true genius behind the dominance of the War Party. It would be he who would rule in Tsuranuanni, perhaps, someday, even openly.

A messenger arrived and bowed before the Warlord, handing him a parchment. The Warlord read quickly, then said, "I must go to the council. Inform the inquisitor I require his services the fourth hour of the night. Guards, return this one to his cell.' As the guards pulled Pug about by his chain, the Warlord said, "Think on this, Milamber. You may die slowly or quickly, but you will die. The choice is yours. Either way, we shall have the truth from you eventually.'

Pug watched as Dominic entered his trance. Pug had told his companions of the Warlord's reaction, and after Hochopepa had raged on for a time, the fat magician had lapsed into silence. Like others of the black robe, Hochopepa found the notion of any whim of his being ignored almost unfathomable. This imprisonment was nearly impossible to contemplate. Meecham had shown

his usual taciturnity, while the monk had also seemed unperturbed. The discussion had been short and resigned. Dominic had soon after begun his exercises, fascinating to Pug. He had sat and begun meditating until he was now entering some sort of trance. In the silence, Pug considered the monk's lesson. Even in this cell, apparently without hope, there was no need for them to surrender to fear and become mindless wretches. Pug turned his mind back, remembering his boyhood at Crydee: the frustrating lessons with Kulgan and Tully, as he sought to master a magic that he would discover, years later, he was unsuited to practise. A shame, he thought to himself. There were many things he had observed during his time at Stardock that had convinced him the Lesser Magic of Midkemia was significantly further advanced than on Kelewan. Most likely, it was a result of there being only one magic on Midkemia.

For variety, Pug tried one of the cantrips taught him by Kulgan as a boy, one he had never mastered anyway. Hmm, he mused, the Lesser Path spell isn't affected. He began to encounter the strange blocking from within himself and almost felt amusement at it. As a boy he had feared that experience, for it signalled failure. Now he knew it was simply his mind, attuned to the Greater Path, rejecting Lesser Path discipline. Still, somehow the effects of the anti-magic wards caused him to attack the problem more obliquely. He closed his eyes, imagining the one thing he had tried on innumerable occasions, failing each time. The pattern of his mind balked at the requirements of that magic, but as it shifted to take on its normal orientation, it somehow rebounded against the wards, recoiled, and . . . Pug sat up, eyes wide. He had almost found it! For the briefest instant he had almost understood. Fighting down excitement, he closed his eyes, head down, and concentrated. If he could only find that one instant, that one crystalline instant when he had understood . . . an instant that had fled as soon as it had come . . . In this dank, squalid cell he had stood upon the brink of perhaps one of the most important discoveries in the history of Tsurani magic. If only he could recapture that instant . . .

Then the doors to the cell opened. Pug looked up, as did Hochopepa and Meecham. Dominic remained in his trance. Elgahar entered, motioning for a guard to close the door behind him. Pug stood, uncramping legs that had succumbed to the cold stones beneath the straw while he had meditated upon his boyhood.

'What you say is disturbing,' said the black-robed magician.

'As it should be, for it is true.'

'Perhaps, but it may not be, even if you believe it to be

true. I would hear everything.'

Pug motioned for the magician to sit, but he shook his head in negation. Shrugging, Pug returned to his place on the floor and began his narrative. When he reached the portion relating to Rogen's vision, Elgahar became observably agitated, halting Pug to ask a series of questions. Pug continued, and when he was through, Elgahar shook his head. 'Tell me, Milamber, on your homeworld, are there many who could have understood what was said to this seer in the vision?'

'No. Only myself and one or two others could have understood it, only the Tsurani in LaMut would have recognized it as ancient High Temple Tsurani.'

'There is a frightening possibility. I must know if you've considered it.'

'What?'

Elgahar leant close to Pug and whispered a single word in his ear. Colour drained from Pug's face and he closed his eyes. Back on Midkemia, his mind had begun the process of intuiting what it could from the information at hand. He had subconsciously known all along what the answer would be. With a single, long sigh, he said, "I have. At every turn I have shied from admitting that possibility, but it is always there.'

Hochopepa said, "What is this you speak of?'

Pug shook his head. 'No, old friend. Not yet. I want Elgahar to consider what he has deduced without hearing your opinion or mine. This is something that must make him reevaluate his loyalties.

'Perhaps. But even if I do, it will not necessarily alter our present circumstance.'

Hochopepa exploded in rage. "How can you say such a thing. What circumstance can matter in the face of the Warlord's crimes? Have you come to the point where all your free will has been surrendered to your brother?'

Elgahar said, "Hochopepa, you of all who wear the black robe should understand, for it was you and fumita who played in the Great Game for years with the Blue Wheel Party.' He spoke of those two magicians' part in helping the Emperor end the Riftwar. 'For the first time in the history of the Empire, the Emperor is in a unique position. With the betrayal at the peace conference, he has come to the position of having ultimate authority while having lost face. He may not use his influence, and he will not again utilize his authority. Five clan Warchiefs died in that betrayal, the five most likely to achieve the office of Warlord. Many families lost position in the High Council because of their deaths. Should he again attempt to order the clans, he may be refused.'

'You speak of regicide,' said Pug.

"It has happened before, Milamber. But that would

mean civil war, for there is no heir. The Light of Heaven is young and has yet to father sons. Of his issue there are only three girls as yet. The Warlord desires only the stabilization of the Empire, not the overthrow of a dynasty more than two thousand years old. I have neither affection nor disaffection for this Warlord. But the Emperor must be made to understand that his position in the order of things is spiritual only, surrendering all final authority to the Warlord. Then shall Tsuranuanni enter an era of endless prosperity.'

Hochopepa barked a bitter laugh. "That you can believe such drivel shows only that our screening at the Assembly is not rigorous enough. '

Ignoring the insult, Elgahar said, "Once the internal order of the Empire has been made stable, then we can counter any possible threat you may herald. Even should what you say be true and my speculation prove accurate, there may be years before we need deal with the issue upon Kelewan - ample time to prepare. You must remember, we of the Assembly have reached new pinnacles of power never dreamt of by our ancestors. What may have been a terror to them may prove only a nuisance to ourselves. '

'You fail in your arrogance, Elgahar. All of you. Hocho and I have discussed this before. Your assumption of supremacy is in error. You have not surpassed your ancestors' might, you have yet to equal it. Among the works of Macros the Black I have found tomes that reveal powers undreamt of in the millennia the Assembly's existed.'

Elgahar seemed intrigued by the notion and was silent for a long time. 'Perhaps,' he said in a thoughtful tone at last. He moved towards the door. 'You have accomplished one thing, Milamber. You convince me it is vital to keep you alive longer than the Warlord's pleasure dictates. You have knowledge we must extract. As to the rest, I must . . . think upon it.'

Pug said, "Yes, Elgahar, think upon it. Think upon one word: that which you whispered in my ear.'

Elgahar seemed on the verge of saying something, then spoke to the guard outside, ordering the door opened. He left, and Hochopepa said, "He's mad.'

'No,' said Pug. 'Not mad, he simply believes what his brother tells him. Anyone who can look into Axantucar's and Ergoran's eyes and think they are the ones to bring prosperity to the Empire is a fool, a believing idealist, but not mad. Ergoran is the one we must truly fear.'

They settled back to silence, and Pug returned to brooding on what Elgahar had whispered to him. The chilling possibility that it represented was too dreadful to dwell upon, so he turned his mind to consider again the

strange moment where for the first time in his life he glimpsed the true mastery of the Lesser Path.

Time had passed. Pug didn't know how long, but he assumed it was four hours past sunset, the time the Warlord had set for interrogation. Guards entered the cell, unshackling Meecham, Dominic, and Pug. Hochopepa was left behind.

They were marched to a room equipped with devices of torture. The Warlord stood resplendent in green and golden robes, speaking to the magician Ergoran. A man in a red hood waited silently while the three prisoners were shackled to pillars in the room, situated so they could see one another.

'Against my better judgment, Ergoran and Elgahar have convinced me it would be beneficial to keep you alive, though each has different reasons. Elgahar seemed inclined to believe your story somewhat, at least enough to think it prudent to learn all we may. Ergoran and I are not so disposed, but there are other things we wish to know. Therefore we shall begin to ensure we have only the truth from you.' He signalled to the Inquisitor, who tore Dominic's robes from him, leaving him wearing only a loincloth. The Inquisitor opened a sealed pot and took out a stick heavy with some whitish substance. He daubed some on Dominic's chest and the monk stiffened. Without metals, the Tsurani had developed methods of torture different from those used on Midkemia, but equally as effective. The substance was a sticky caustic that began 'to blister the skin as soon as administered. Dominic screwed his eyes shut and bit back a cry.

"For reasons of economy, we thought you'd be more willing to tell us the truth if your companions were given attention first. From what your former compatriots tell me and from that unforgivable outburst at the Imperial Games, you seem to have a compassionate nature, Milamber. Will you tell us the truth?'

'Everything I have said is true, Warlord. torturing my friends will not change that!'

'Master!' came a cry.

The Warlord looked at his Inquisitor. 'What?'

'This man . . . look.' Dominic had lost his pained expression. He hung from the pillar, beatific peace upon

his face.

Ergoran stepped up before the monk and examined him. 'He's in some manner of trance?'

Both Warlord and magician looked at Pug, and the magician said, 'What tricks does this false priest practise, Milamber?'

"He is no priest of Hantukama, true, but he is a cleric

of my world. He can place his mind at rest regardless of what occurs with his body.'

The Warlord nodded towards the inquisitor, who removed a sharp knife from the table. He stepped before the monk and, with a sudden cut, sliced open his shoulder. Dominic did not move, not even an involuntary twitch, in reaction. Using pincers, the inquisitor took a hot coal and applied it to the cut. Again the monk did not react. The Inquisitor put away his pincers and said, "It is useless, master. His mind is blocked away. We've had this problem with priests before.'

Pug's brow furrowed. While not free of politics, the temples tended to be circumspect in their relationship with the High Council. If the Warlord had been interrogating priests, that indicated movement on the part of the temples towards those allied against the War Party. From Hochopepa's ignorance of this fact, it also meant the Warlord was moving covertly and had stolen the march on his opposition. As much as anything, this told Pug that the Empire was in serious straits, even now poised on the brink of civil war. The assault upon those who stood with the Emperor would come soon.

'This one's no priest,' said Ergoran, coming up to mee-cham. He looked up at the tall franklin. "He's a simple slave, so he should prove more manageable.' Meecham spat full in the magician's face. Ergoran, used to the unhesitating fear and respect due a Great One, was as stunned as if he had been clubbed. He staggered back, wiping spittle from his face. Enraged, he said coldly, 'You've earned a slow, lingering death, slave.' Meecham smiled, for the first time Pug could remember, a broad grin, almost leering. His face was rendered bFssibly demonic by the scar on his cheek. "It was worth it, you genderless mule.'

In his anger, Meecham had spoken in the King's Tongue, but the tone of the insult was not lost on the magician. He reached over, pulled the sharp blade from the Inquisitor's table, and slashed a long furrow on mee-cham's chest. The franklin stiffened, his face draining of colour as the wound began to bleed. Ergoran stood before him in triumph. Then the Midkemian spat again. "The Inquisitor turned to the Warlord. "Master, the Great One is interfering with delicate work.'

The magician stepped back, letting the knife drop. He ~ wiped the spittle from his face as he returned to the Warlord's side. With hatred in his voice, he said, "Don't be too hasty in speaking what you know, Milamber. I wish this carrion a long session.'

Pug struggled to battle with the magic neutralizing properties of the bracelets upon his wrists, but to no

avail. The Inquisitor began to work upon Meecham, but the stoic franklin refused to cry out. For half an hour the inquisitor practised his bloody trade, until at last Meecham sounded a strangled groan and passed into semiconsciousness.

The Warlord said, "Why have you returned, Milamber?"

Pug, feeling Meecham's pain as if it were his own, said, 'I've told you the truth.' He looked at Ergoran. "You know it's the truth.' He knew his plea fell on deaf ears, for the enraged magician wished Meecham to suffer for spite, not caring that Pug had told all.

The Warlord indicated to the Inquisitor that he was to begin upon pug. The red-hooded man tore Pug's robes open. The pot of caustic was opened and a small daub was applied to Pug's chest. Years of hard work as a slave in the swamp had left Pug a lean, muscled man, and his body tensed as the pain began. At first daub there had been no sensation, then an instant later pain seared his flesh as the chemicals in the paste reacted. Pug could almost hear the skin blister. The Warlord's voice cut through the pain. 'Why have you returned? Whom have you contacted?'

Pug closed his eyes against the fire on his chest. He sought refuge in the calming exercises Kulgan had taught him as an apprentice. Another daub of paste and another fire erupted, this time on the sensitive flesh inside his thigh. Pug's mind rebelled and sought to find refuge in magic. Again and again he battled to break through the barrier imposed by the magic limiting bracelets. In his youth he had been able to find his path to magic ~ only under great stress. When his life had been threatened by trolls, he had found his first spell. When battling Squire Roland, he had lashed out magically, and when he had destroyed the Imperial Games, it had been from a deeply held well of anger and outrage. Now his mind was an enraged animal, bouncing off the bars of a magically imposed cage, and like an animal, he reacted blindly, striking against the barrier again and again, determined either to be free or to die.

Hot coals were placed against his flesh and he screamed. It was an animal cry, mixed pain and rage, and his mind lashed out. His thoughts became blurred, as if he existed in a landscape of reflecting surfaces, a mad spinning room of mirrors, each casting back an image. He saw the kitchen boy of Crydee looking back at him in one surface, then Kulgan's student in another. In a third was the young squire, and the fourth, a slave in the Shinzawai swamp camp. But in the reflections behind the reflections, the mirrors seen within the mirrors, in each he saw a new thing. Behind the boy in the kitchen he saw a man, a servant, but there was no doubt who that man was. Pug,



without magic, without training, grown to manhood as a simple member of the castle's serving staff, laboured in the kitchen. Behind the image of the young squire he saw a Kingdom noble, with Princess Carline upon his arm, his wife. His mind whirled. He frantically sought something. He studied the image of Kulgan's student. Behind him he saw the reflected image of an adult practitioner of the lesser Art. In his mind Pug spun, seeking the origin of that reflected image within an image, of the Pug grown to 'be a master of the Lesser Magic. Then he saw the source of that image, a possible future never realized, a chance of fate having diverted his life from that outcome. But in the alternate probabilities of his life he found what he sought. He found an escape. Suddenly he understood. A way was opened to him and his mind fled down that path. ". Pug's eyes snapped open and he looked past the redhooded figure of the Inquisitor. Meecham hung groaning, again conscious, while Dominic was still lost in a trance. Pug used a mental ability to turn off his awareness of the injury done to his body. In an instant he stood without feeling pain. Then his mind reached towards the black-robed figure of Ergoran. The Great One of the empire almost staggered as Pug's gaze locked upon his own. For the first time in memory, a magician of the greater Path employed a talent of the Lesser Path, and ~ engaged Ergoran in a contest of wills. With mind-shattering force, Pug overwhelmed the magician, stunning him instantly. The black-robed figure

sagged for a moment until Pug took control of his body. Closing his own eyes, Pug now saw through Ergoran's. He adjusted his senses, then had complete command over the Tsurani Great One. Ergoran's hand shot forward and a cascade of energies sprang from his fingers, striking the Inquisitor from behind. Red and purple lines of force danced along the man's body as he arched and shrieked. Then the Inquisitor danced across the room like a mad puppet, his movements jerky and spastic as he cried out in agony. The Warlord stood briefly stunned, then screamed, 'Ergoran! What insanity is this?' He grabbed at the magician's robe as the Inquisitor slammed against the far wall and fell to the stone floor. The instant the Warlord came into contact with the magician, the painful energies ceased to strike the Inquisitor and engulfed the Warlord. Axantucar writhed as he fell back from the onslaught. The Inquisitor rose from the floor, shaking his head to clear it, and staggered back towards the captives. The red-hooded torturer pulled a slender knife from the table, sensing Pug to be the author of his pain. He stepped towards Pug, but Meecham gripped his chains and hoisted himself up. With a heave, Meecham reached out and

encircled the Inquisitor's neck with his legs. In a scissors grip he held the struggling Inquisitor, squeezing with

tremendous power. The Inquisitor struck at Meecham's leg with the knife, slashing it across the flesh over and over, but Meecham kept pressure on. Again and again the knife cut, until Meecham's legs were covered in his own blood, but the Inquisitor couldn't cut deeply with the blood-slick little knife. Meecham only gave a joyous cry of victory. Then, with a Brunt and a jerk, he crushed

the man's windpipe. As the Inquisitor collapsed, strength flowed out of the franklin. Meecham dropped, held up only by his chains. With a weak smile he nodded towards Pug.

Pug broke off the pain spell and the Warlord fell back from Ergoran. Pug commanded the magician to approach. The Great One's mind felt like a soft, malleable thing under Pug's magic control, 'and somehow Pug knew how to command the magician to act, while keeping aware of what he himself was doing.

The magician began freeing Pug from his chains, while the Warlord struggled to his feet. One hand was free. Axantucar staggered to the outer door. Pug made a decision. If he could be free of the bonds, he could handle any number of guards called in by the Warlord, but he couldn't control two men and he didn't think he could keep control of the magician long enough to destroy the Warlord and free himself. Or could he? Then Pug recognized the danger. This new magic was proving difficult and his judgment was slipping. Why was he allowing the Warlord to gain his freedom? The pain of torture and the exertion were taking a terrible toll, and Pug felt himself weakening by the moment. The Warlord pulled open the door, screaming for guards, and when it opened, Axantucar grabbed at a spear. With a heave, he struck Ergoran full in the back. The blow knocked the magician to his knees before he could loosen Pug's other hand. It also had the effect of sending a psychic shock back to strike Pug. Pug screamed in concern with Ergoran's dying pain.

Fog shrouded Pug's mind. Then something within cracked, and his thoughts became a sea of glittering shards as the mirrors of memory shattered, scraps of past lessons, images of his family, smells, tastes, and sounds rang through his consciousness.

They weaved Lights danced through his mind, first scattering motes .Of starlight, reflections of new vistas within. , forming a pattern, a circle, a tunnel, then a way. He plunged through the way and found himself

upon a new plane of consciousness. New paths were walked, new understandings achieved. That path opened to him before, through pain and terror, was now his to walk at will. At last he stood in command of those powers which were his legacy.

His vision cleared and he saw soldiers struggling on the stairs. Pug turned his attention to the remaining shackle upon his wrist. Suddenly he remembered an old lesson of Kulgan's. With a caress of his mind, the hardened leather shackle was made soft and supple again and he pulled his hand free.

Pug concentrated and the magic-inhibiting bracelets fell away, broken in half. He looked up at the stairs, and for the first time the full impact of what he saw registered. The Warlord and his soldiers had fled the room as some sort of struggle took place above. A soldier in the blue armour of the Kanazawai clan lay dead next to an Imperial White. Pug quickly released Meecham, easing him to the ground. He was bleeding heavily from the leg wounds and cuts to his body. Pug sent Dominic a questing mental message: Return. Dominic's eyes opened at once as his shackles fell off and Pug said, "Tend to Meecham." Without asking for explanation, the monk turned to treat the wounded franklin.

Pug dashed up the stairs and ran to where Hochopepa lay imprisoned. He entered the cell and the startled magician said, "What is it? I heard some noise outside." Pug bent over and changed the manacles to soft leather, "I don't know. Allies, I think. I suspect the Blue Wheel Party is attempting to free us." He pulled Hochopepa's hands free of the now soft restraints.

Hochopepa stood on wobbly legs. "We must help them help us," he said with resolution. Then he considered his freedom and the softened restraints. "Milamber, how did you do that?"

Passing through the door, Pug answered, "I don't know, Hocho. It will be something to discuss."

Pug raced up the stairs towards the upper level of the palace. In the central gallery of the Warlord's palace, armed men struggled in hand-to-hand combat. Men in . armour of various colours battled with the Warlord's Imperial Whites. Looking about the bloody combat, Pug saw Axantucar fighting past a struggling pair of soldiers. Two white-armoured soldiers covered his retreat. Pug closed his eyes and reached out. His eyes opened and he could see the invisible hand of energy he had created. He could feel it as he could his own. As if picking up a kitten by the neck, he reached out and gripped the Warlord. Raising him up, he drew the struggling, kicking man towards him. The soldiers' halted their struggle at the sight of the Warlord above them. Axantucar, supreme

warrior of the Empire, shrieked in unashamed terror at the invisible force that had grabbed him.

Pug pulled him back towards where he and Hocho stood. Some of the Imperial Whites recovered from their shock and deduced that the renegade magician must be the cause of their master's dilemma. Several broke off from their struggles with the soldiers in coloured armour and ran to aid the Warlord.

Then a loud voice cried out, 'Ichindar! Ninety-one times Emperor.'

Instantly every soldier in the room, regardless of which side he struggled for, dropped to the floor, putting forehead against the stone. The officers stood with heads bowed. Only Hochopepa and Pug watched as a cortege of Warchiefs, all in the armour of those who constituted the Blue Wheel Party, entered the room. In the forefront, wearing armour not seen in years, came Kamatsu, again for a time Warchief of the Kanazawai Clan. Forming up, they parted to allow the Emperor to enter. Ichindar supreme authority of the Empire, walked into the hall resplendent in his ceremonial golden armour. He stalked to where Pug waited, the Warlord still hanging in midair above him, and surveyed the scene. At last he said, 'Great One, you do seem to cause difficulty whenever you appear.' He looked up at the Warlord. "If you'll put him down, we can get to the bottom of this mess.' Pug allowed the Warlord to fall, hitting the ground heavily.

'That is an amazing tale, Milamber,' said Ichindar to Pug. He sat on the pillows occupied earlier that day by the Warlord, sipping a cup of the Warlord's chocha. "It would be simple to say I believe you and that all is forgiven, but the dishonour visited upon me by those you call elves and dwarves is an impossible thing to forget.' Around him stood the Warchiefs of the clans of the Blue Wheel, and the magician Elgahar.

Hochopepa said, 'if the Light of Heaven will permit me? Remember they were but tools, soldiers, if you will, in a game of shah. That this Macros was attempting to prevent the arrival of the Enemy is but another concern. That he is responsible for the betrayal rids you of the responsibility of avenging yourself upon anyone but Macros. And as he is presumed dead, it is a moot issue.' The Emperor said, "Hochopepa, your tongue is as facile as a relli.' He referred to the water-snake-like creature known for its supple movement. "I will not be punitive without good cause, but I also am reluctant to take my former stance of conciliation towards the Kingdom.'

pug said, 'Majesty, that would not be wise at this time, in any event.' When Ichindar looked interested in the comment, Pug continued. 'While I hope that someday our two nations may meet again as friends, at this time there are more pressing matters that demand attention, For the short term, it must be as if the two worlds were never rejoined.'

The Emperor sat up. 'From what little I understand of such matters, I suspect you are correct. Larger issues need to be resolved. I must make a decision shortly that may forever change the course of Tsurani history.' He lapsed into silence. For a long time he held his own council, then said, "When Kamatsu and the others came to me, telling me of your return and your suspicion of some black terror of Tsurani origin upon your world, I wished to ignore it all. I cared nothing for your problems or those of your world. I was even indifferent to the possibility of once more invading your land. I was fearful of acting again, for I had lost much face before the High Council after the attack on your world.' He seemed lost in thought a brief moment. "Your world was lovely, what little I saw before the battle.' He sighed, his green eyes fastening on Pug. 'Milamber, had Elgahar not come to the palace, confirming what your allies in the Blue Wheel Party reported, you most likely would be dead, and I would soon follow after, and Axantucar on his way to bloody civil war. He gained the white and gold only because of the outrage against the betrayal. You prevented my death, if not some greater calamity for the Empire. I think that warrants some consideration, though you know the turmoil in the Empire is just beginning." Pug said, "I am enough a product of the Empire to understand that the Game of the Council will become even more vicious.'

Ichindar looked outside the window, where the body of Axantucar hung twisting in the wind. "I will have to consult the historians, but that is the first Warlord hung by an Emperor, I believe.' Hanging was the ultimate shame and punishment for a warrior. 'Still, as he no doubt planned the same fate for myself, I don't think I'm 'likely to have a rebellion, at least not this week.'

The Warchiefs of the High Council who were in attendance looked at one another. Finally Kamatsu said, 'Light of Heaven, if I may? The War Party retires in confusion. The betrayal by the Warlord has robbed them of any base for negotiation within the High Council. Even as we speak, the War Party is no more, and its clans and families will be meeting to discuss which parties to join to regain some shred of their influence. For now the moderates rule. '

The Emperor shook his head and in 'a surprisingly

strong tone said, 'No, honoured lord, you are wrong. In Tsuranuanni I rule.' He stood surveying those around him. "Until these matters Milamber brought to our attention are resolved and the Empire is truly safe, or the threat has been shown to be false, the High Council is recessed. There will be no new Warlord until I have commanded an election within the council. Until I decree otherwise, I am the law.

Hochopepa said, 'Majesty, the Assembly?'

'As before, but be warned, Great One, see to your brothers. If another Black Robe is ever discovered involved in a plot against my house, the status of Great Ones outside the law will end. Even should I be forced to pit all the armies of the Empire against your magic might, even to the utter ruination of the Empire, I will not allow any to challenge the supremacy of the Emperor again. Is that understood?' Hochopepa said, "It will be done, Imperial Majesty.

Elgahar's renunciation and his brother's and the Warlord's acts will give others in the Assembly pause to think. "I shall bring the matter before the membership.' The Emperor said to Pug. "Great One, I cannot instruct the Assembly to reinstate you, nor am I entirely comfortable having you around. But until this matter is resolved you are free to come and go as long as you need. When you again depart for your homeworld, inform us of your findings. We shall be willing to accommodate you somewhat in preventing the destruction of your world, if we may. Now' - he started for the door - "I must return to my palace. I have an Empire to rebuild.'

Pug watched as the others left. Kamatsu came up to him and said, 'Great One, it seems to have ended well for a time.'

'For a time, old friend. Seek to aid the Light of Heaven, for his life may be a short one when tonight's decrees are made public tomorrow.

The Lord of the Shinzawai bowed before Pug. 'Your will, Great One.'

To Hochopepa, Pug said, "Let's fetch Dominic and Meecham from where they rest and go to the Assembly, Hocho. We have work to do.'

'in a moment, for I have a question of Elgahar.' The stout magician faced the former Warlord's pet. 'Why the sudden reversal of position? I had always counted you your brother's tool.'

The slender magician replied, 'What Milamber carried warning of, upon his homeworld, gave me pause to think. I spent time weighing all possibilities, and when I "suggested the obvious answer to Milamber, he concurred. It was a risk too grave to ignore. Compared to this, all other matters are inconsequential.'

Hochopepa turned to face Pug. "I do not understand  
What does he speak of?"

Pug sagged in fatigue and something more, a deep hidden  
terror coming to the fore. "I hesitate even to  
speak of it." He looked at those about him. "Elgahar  
concluded something I suspected but was afraid to admit,  
even to myself."

For a moment he was silent, and those in the room  
seemed to hold their breath, then he said, "The Enemy  
has returned."

Pug pushed back the leather-covered volume before him  
and said, "Another dead end." He passed a hand over his  
face, closing tired eyes. He had so much to deal with and  
a sense of fleeing time. The discovery of his ability as a  
Lesser Path magician he kept to himself. There was a  
side to his nature he had never suspected, and he wished  
more private conditions under which to explore these  
revelations.

Hochopepa and Elgahar looked up from where they  
sat reading. Elgahar had worked as hard as any, demonstrating  
some wish to make amends. "These records are  
in a shambles, Milamber," he commented.

Pug agreed. "I told Hocho two years ago that the  
Assembly had become lax in its arrogance. This confusion  
is but one example." Pug adjusted his black robe. When  
his reasons for returning were made known, he had, on a  
motion by his old friends, seconded by Elgahar, been  
reinstated to full membership without hesitation. Of the  
members in attendance, only a few abstained and none  
voted in opposition. Each had stood upon the Tower of  
Testing and had seen the rage and might of the Enemy.  
Shimone, one of Pug's oldest friends in the Assembly  
and his former instructor, entered with Dominic. Since  
the encounter with the Warlord's Inquisitor the night  
before, the priest had shown remarkable recuperative  
powers. He had used his magic healing arts on Meecham  
and Pug, but something in the way they worked prevented  
him from using them upon himself. However, he had also  
possessed the knowledge to instruct the magicians at the  
Assembly in concocting a poultice that prevented festering  
in the cuts and burns he had endured.

"Milamber, this priest friend of yours is a wonder. He  
has some marvellous means of cataloguing our works  
here."

Dominic said, "I have only shared what we have learned  
at Sarth. There is a great deal of confusion here, but it is  
not as bad as it appears on casual inspection."

Hochopepa stretched. "What has me concerned is that  
there is little here we don't already know. It is as if the  
vision we shared upon the tower is the earliest recollection

of the Enemy, and no other has been recorded.'

'That may be true,' said Pug. 'Remember that most of the truly great magicians perished at the golden bridge, leaving only apprentices and Lesser Magicians behind. It may have been years before any attempt to keep records commenced.'

Meecham entered carrying a huge bundle of ancient tomes heavily bound in treated skins. Pug indicated a spot on the floor nearby and Meecham put them down. Pug opened the bundle and handed copies of the work around. Elgahar carefully opened one, the book's binding creaking as he did. "Gods of Tsuranuanni, these works are old.'

'Among the oldest in the Assembly,' Dominic said. "It took Meecham and myself an hour just to locate them and another to dig them out.'

Shimone said, "This is almost another dialect, it's so ancient. There are verb usages here, inflections I've never heard of.'

Hocho said, 'Milamber, listen to this.'"And when the bridge vanished, still did Avsrie insist on council."

Elgahar said, 'The golden bridge?'

Pug and the others stopped what they were doing and listened as Hochopepa continued reading. "Of the Alstwanabi, those remaining were but thirteen, numbering Avarie, Marlee, Canon" - the list goes on - "and little comfort among them, but Marlee spoke her words of power and calmed their fears. We are upon this world made for us by Chakakan" - could that be an ancient form of "Chochocan"? - "and we shall endure. Those who watched say we are safe from the Darkness. " The Darkness? Can it be?'

Pug reread the passage. 'This is the same name used by Rogen after his vision. It is too far a stretch to be called coincidence. There is our proof: the Enemy is somehow involved in the attempts upon Prince Arutha.'

Dominic said, 'There is something else there as well.'

Elgahar agreed. 'Yes, who are "those who watched".?'

Pug pushed away the book, the toll of the last day bringing on sleep unbidden. Of all those who had searched through the day with him, only Dominic remained. The Ishapian monk seemed able to disregard fatigue at will.

Pug closed his eyes, intent on resting them for a short while only. His mind had been occupied with many things, and many things he had put aside. Now images flickered past, but none seemed to abide.

Soon Pug was asleep, and while he slept, he dreamt.

He stood upon the roof of the Assembly again. He wore the grey of a trainee, as he was shown the tower steps by Shimone. He knew he must mount, again to face



the storm, again to pass that test which would gain him the rank of Great One.

He mounted and climbed in his dream, seeing something at each step, a string of flashing images. A stover bird struck the water for a fish, its scarlet wings flashing against the blue of sky and water. Then other images came flooding in, hot jungles where slaves toiled, a clash of warriors, a dying soldier, Thun running over the tundra of the north, a young wife seducing a guard of her husband's household, a spice merchant at his stall. Then his vision travelled to the north, and he saw . . .

Ice fields, bitter-cold and swept by steel-edged wind.

He could smell the bitterness of age here. From within a tower of snow and ice, figures emerged bundled against the wind. Human-shaped, they walked with a smooth tread that marked them other than human. They were beings old and wise in ways unknown to men, and they sought a sign in the sky. They looked up and they watched. They watch. Watchers.

Pug sat up, eyes open. 'What is it, Pug?' asked dominick. 'Get the others,' he said. 'I know.'

Pug stood before the others, his black robes blowing in the morning breeze. "You'll have no one with you?"

Hochopepa asked again.

'No, Hocho. You can help by getting Dominic and Meecham back to my estate so they may return to Midkemia. I've passed along all I've learned here for Kulgan and the others, with messages for all who need know what we've discovered so far. I may be seeking a legend, trying to find these Watchers in the north. You can help more by getting my friends back.'

Elgahar stepped forward. 'if it is permitted, I would accompany your friends to your world.'

Pug said, 'Why?'

"The Assembly has little need for one caught up in the affairs of the Warlord, and from what you have said, there are Great Ones in training at your academy who need instruction. Count it an act of appeasement. I will remain there, at least for a while, continuing the education of these trainees.'

Pug considered. 'Very well. Kulgan will instruct you in what needs be done. Always remember that the rank of Great One means nothing on Midkemia. You will be simply one among a community. It will prove difficult.'

Elgahar said, "I shall endeavour.'

Hochopepa said, 'That's a capital idea. I've long wondered about this barbaric land you hail from, and I could use a vacation from my wife. I'll go, too.'

'Hocho,' said Pug, laughing, 'the academy is a rough place, devoid of your usual comforts.'

He stepped forward. 'Never mind that. Milamber, you'll require allies on your world. I may speak lightly, but your friends will need help and soon. The Enemy is something beyond the experience of any of us. We'll start now to combat it. As for the discomfort, I'll manage.'  
"Besides," said Pug, "you've been licking your lips over

Macros's library ever since I've spoken of it.'  
Meecham shook his head. 'Him and Kulgan. Two peas in a pod.'  
Hochopepa said, "What's a pea?"  
'You'll discover soon, old friend.' Pug embraced Hocho and Shimone, shook hands with Meecham and Dominic, and bowed to the other 'members of the Assembly.  
'Follow the instructions on activating the rift as I've written them. And be certain to close it, once through, the Enemy may still seek a rift to enter our worlds.  
'I go to the Shinzawai estate, the northernmost destination where I can use a pattern. From there I'll take horse and cross the ThOu tundra. If the Watchers still exist, I shall find them and return to Midkemia with what they know of the Enemy. Then shall we meet again. Until then, my friends, care for one another.'  
Pug incanted the required spell, and with a shimmer he

was gone.  
The others stood about awhile.  
Finally Hochopepa said, "Come, my friends.'  
He looked at Dominic, Meecham, and Elgahar.  
"Come, we must make ready.'

18

## Vengeance

Jimmy woke with a start.  
Someone had walked by on the surface. Jimmy had slept through the day with the others, awaiting the fall of night for the investigation of the black building. He had taken the position closest to the surface.  
Jimmy shivered. Throughout the day his dreams had been alien, haunted by troubling images - not true nightmares, but rather dreams filled with odd longings and dim recognitions. It was almost as if he had inherited another's dreams, and that other hadn't been human. Somehow he felt lingering memories of rage and hatred. that left him feeling dirty.  
Shaking off the odd, fuzzy feeling, he looked down.  
The others were dozing, except for Baru, who seemed to be meditating. At least, he sat upright with legs crossed and his hands before him, eyes closed and breath even.

Jimmy cautiously pulled himself upwards, until he was just below the surface. Two voices sounded some distance away. " here somewhere.'

.if he was stupid enough to go inside, then the fault is his,' came another voice .with a strange accent. A Dark Brother, Jimmy thought.

'Well, I'm not going in after him - not after being warned to keep clear,' said a second human voice.

'Reitz said to find Jaccon, and you know how he is about desertion'. If we don't find Jaccon, he'll likely have our ears just for spite,' complained the first human.

'Reitz is nothing,' came the voice of the moredhel.

'Murad has ordered that none should enter the black building. Would you invoke his wrath and face his Black Slayers?'

'No,' said the first human voice, (but you better think of something to tell Reitz. I'm fresh out . . . '

The voices trailed off. Jimmy waited until the voices couldn't be heard, then chanced another brief look. Two humans and a moredhel were walking towards the .bridge, one of the humans gesturing. They halted at the end of the bridge, pointing towards the house and explaining something. It was Murad they were speaking to. At the far end of the bridge, Jimmy could see an entire company of human horsemen waiting as the four crossed over.

Jimmy dropped down and woke Arutha. "We've got company upstairs,' the boy whispered. Lowering his voice so Baru would not hear, he said, 'And your old scarfaced friend is back with them.'

'How close is it to sundown?'

'Less than an hour, perhaps two to full darkness.'

Arutha nodded and settled in to wait. Jimmy dropped past him to the floor of the upper cavern and foraged through his pack for some jerked beef. His stomach had been reminding him he had not eaten for the last day and he decided that if he was going to die tonight, he might as well eat first.

Time passed slowly, and Jimmy noticed that something beyond the normal tension expected in this situation had infected the mood of each of Arutha's company. Martin and Laurie had both fallen into deep, brooding silences, and Arutha seemed introverted almost to the point of being catatonic. Baru silently mouthed chants and appeared in a trance, while Roald sat facing a wall, staring at some unseen image. Jimmy shook off distant images of strange people, oddly dressed and engaged in alien undertakings, and forced himself alert. "hey,' he said with just enough authority to jar everyone and turn their attention to him. 'You all look . . . lost.'

Martin's eyes seemed to focus. "I. . . I was thinking of Father.'

Arutha spoke softly. "It's this place. I was . . . nearly without hope, ready to give up.'

Roald said, "I was at Cutter's Gap again, only Highcastle's army wasn't going to arrive in time.'

Baru said, "I was singing . . . my death chant.'

Laurie crossed to stand next to Jimmy. "It's this place I was thinking Carline had found another while I was gone.' He looked at Jimmy. 'You?'

Jimmy shrugged. "It hit me funny, too, but maybe it's my age or something. It only made me think of strange people dressed in weird clothing. I don't know. It sort of makes me angry.'

Martin said, "The elves said the moredhel come here to dream dreams of power.'

Jimmy said, 'Well, all I know is you looked like those walking dead.' He moved towards the crevice. "It's dark. Why don't I go and look about, and if things are quiet, then we can all go.'

Arutha said, "I think perhaps you and I should go together.'

'No,' said the boy thief. "I hate to show a lack of deference, but if I'm to risk my life doing something I'm expert in, let me do it. You need to have someone crawl about inside that place, and I'll not have you tagging after.'

"It's too dangerous,' said Arutha.

'I'll not deny that,' answered Jimmy. 'I'll guarantee that Dragon Lord shrine will need some skill cracking, and if you've any sense you'll let me go alone. Otherwise you'll be dead before I can say, 'Don't step there, Highness," and we might as well not have bothered in the first place. We could have just let the Nighthawks skewer you, and I'd have spent many more comfortable nights in Krondor. '

Martin said, 'He's right.'

Arutha said, "I don't like this, but you are right.' As the boy turned to go, he added, 'Have I told you that you put me in mind of that pirate Amos Trask sometimes?'

In the darkness they could sense the boy's grin.

Jimmy scampered up through the crevice and peered out. Seeing no one, he made a quick run for the building. Coming up against the wall, he edged around until he was before the door. He stood quietly for a moment, judging the best way to approach the problem. He studied the door once again, then quickly clambered up the wall, finding finger- and toeholds in the moulding next to the door. Again he studied the anteroom through the window. Double doors opened up into darkness beyond. Otherwise the room was empty. Jimmy glanced upwards and was confronted by a blank ceiling. What was waiting inside to kill him? As sure as dogs had fleas, there was a

trap inside. And if so, what sort and how to get around it? Again Jimmy was visited by the nagging itch of something odd about this place.

Jimmy dropped back to the ground and took a deep breath. He reached out and lifted the latch of the door. With a shove, he leapt aside, to the left, so the swinging door, hinged on the right, would shield him from anything behind it for an instant. Nothing happened.

Jimmy peered cautiously inside, letting his senses seek out inconsistencies, flaws in the design of the place, any clue to reveal a trap. He saw none. Jimmy leant against the door. What if the trap were magic? He had no defences against some enchantment meant to kill humans, non-moredhel, anyone wearing green, or whatever it might be. Jimmy stuck his hand across the portal, ready to snatch it back. Nothing happened.

Jimmy sat. Then he lay down. From the low angle everything looked different and he hoped he might see something. As he rose, something did register. The floor was made of marble slabs of equal size and texture, with slight cracks between them. He lightly placed his foot on the slab before the door, slowly permitting his weight to fall upon it, feeling for any movement. There was none.

Jimmy entered and moved around towards the far doors. He inspected every stone slab before he stepped upon it, and decided none were trapped. He inspected the walls and ceiling, gauging everything about the room that might provide him with some intelligence. Nothing. The old, familiar feeling plagued jimmy: something was wrong here.

With a sigh, Jimmy faced the open doors into the heart of the building and entered.

Jimmy had seen many unsavoury characters in his former occupation, and this Jaccon would have fitted in perfectly.

Jimmy lay flat and rolled the corpse over. As the dead man's weight landed upon the other stone before the door, there was a faint snapping sound and something sped overhead. Jimmy examined Jaccon and found a small dart stuck in the man's chest near the collarbone.

Jimmy didn't touch it, he didn't have to: he knew it contained a quick-acting poison. Another item of interest on the fellow was a beautifully carved dagger with a jewelled hilt. Jimmy plucked it from the man's belt and stuck it inside his tunic.

Jimmy sat back upon his heels. He had walked through a long, blank hall, with no doors, down into a subterranean level of the building. He judged he stood less than a hundred yards from the caverns where Arutha and the others waited. He had stumbled upon the corpse at the only door leaving the hall. The stone slab directly

beyond the door was ever so slightly depressed. He rose and stepped through the door, diagonally to the stone next to the one before the door. The trap was so obvious it shouted for caution, but this fool, in his rush towards fabled wealth, had walked into it. And paid the price.

Something bothered Jimmy. The trap was too obvious. It was as if someone wanted him to feel confident in defeating it. He shook his head. Whatever tendency towards incaution he'd had was gone. Now he was fully professional, a thief who understood that any misstep would likely be his last.

Jimmy wished for more light than was provided by the single torch he had brought along. He inspected the floor below Jaccon and saw another displaced stone. He ran his hand along the door-jamb and found no trip wire or other triggering device. Stepping across the threshold, avoiding the stones before the door, Jimmy passed the corpse and continued on towards the heart of the building.

It was a circular room. In the centre of it a slender pedestal rose. Upon the pedestal sat a crystal sphere, lit from above by some unseen light source. And within the sphere rested a single branch with silver-green leaves, red berries, and silver thorns. Jimmy walked cautiously. He looked everywhere but where the pedestal rested. He explored every inch of the room he could reach without entering the pool of light about the sphere, and found nothing resembling a trap-springing device. But the nagging at the back of Jimmy's mind, which had been with him all along, kept shouting that something was wrong about this place. Since discovering Jaccon, he had avoided three different traps, all easy enough for any competent thief to spot. Now here, where he expected the last trap to be, he found none.

Jimmy sat down on the floor and began to think.

Arutha and the others came alert. Jimmy came scrambling back down into the crevice, to land with a thud on the floor of the cave. 'What did you find?' asked Arutha.

'It's a big place. It's got lots of empty rooms, all cleverly fashioned so that you can only move one way from the door to the centre of the building and out.

There's nothing in there but some sort of little shrine in the centre. There're a few traps, simple enough ones to get around.

'But the whole thing's too off-centre. Something's not right. The building's a fake.'

'What?' said Arutha.

'Just suppose you wanted to catch you, and you were worried about you being very clever. Don't you think

you might just add one last catchall in case all the bright lads you hired to catch you were a mite slow?'

"You think the building's a trap?" said Martin.

"Yes, a big elaborate, clever trap. Look, suppose you got this mystic lake and all your tribe comes here to make magic or get power from the dead or whatever it is the Dark Brothers do up here? you want to add this one last catchall, so you think like a human. Maybe Dragon Lords don't build buildings, but humans do, so you build this building, this big building with nothing in it. Then you put a sprig of Silverthorn in some place, like in a shrine inside, and you rig a trap. Someone finds the little hellos you put along the way, gets around them, thinking they're being very, very clever, wanders about, finds the Silverthorn, pulls it, and . . ."

"And the trap springs," said Laurie, his tone appreciative of the boy's logic.

'And the trap springs,' said Jimmy. "I don't know how they did it, but I'll bet the last trap is magic of some sort. The rest were too easy to find, then, at the end, nothing. I bet you touch the sphere with the Silverthorn in it and a dozen doors between you and the outside slam shut, a hundred of those dead warriors come out of the walls, or the whole building simply falls on you.'

Arutha said, "I'm not convinced.'

"Look, you've got a greedy pack of bandits up there. Most of them aren't very smart or they wouldn't be outlaws living in the mountains. They'd be self-respecting thieves in a city. Besides being stupid, they're greedy. So they come up here to earn some gold looking for the Prince and they're told, "Don't go in the building." Now, each one of these clever lads thinks the moredhel are lying, because he knows everyone else is as stupid and greedy as he is. One of these clever lads goes up there looking around, and gets a dart in the gullet for his efforts.

'After I found the sphere on the pedestal, I doubled back and really looked around. That place was built by the moredhel, recently. It's about as ancient as I am. It's mostly a wood building, with stone facing. I've been in old buildings. This isn't one. I don't know how they did it. Maybe with magic, or just a whole lot of slave labour, but it's no more than a few months old.'

'But Galain said this was a Valheru place,' said Arutha. Martin said, "I think him right, but I think Jimmy right as well. Remember what you told me of Tomas's rescue from the Valheru underground hall by Dolgan, just before the war?" Arutha said he did. 'That place sounds much like this. '

'Light a torch,' said Arutha. Roald did so, and they

moved away from the crevice.

Laurie said, 'Has anyone noticed that for a cave the ground is fairly flat?'

'And the walls're pretty regular,' added Roald.

Baru looked about. "In our haste we never examined this place closely. It is not natural. The boy is right. The building is a trap.'

Martin said, 'This cave system has had two thousand years or more to wear away. With that fissure above us, rain comes through here every winter, as well as seepage from the lake above. It has worn away most of what was carved upon the walls.' He ran his hand over what seemed at first glance to be swirls in the stone. 'But not all.' He indicated some design on the walls, rendered abstract by years of erosion.

Baru said, 'And so we dream ancient dreams of hopelessness.

Jimmy said, 'There are some tunnels we haven't explored yet. Let's have a look.'

Arutha looked at his companions. "Very well. You take the lead, Jimmy. Let's backtrack to that cave with all the tunnels, then you pick a likely one and we'll see where it leads.'

In the third tunnel they found the stairway leading down. Following it, they came to a large hallway, ancient from the look of the sediment upon the floor. Regarding it, Baru said, "No foot has trod this hall in ages.'

Tapping the surface of the floor with his boot, Martin agreed. 'This is years of buildup.'

Jimmy led them along, under giant vaulted arches from which hung dust-laden torch holders, long rusted to near-uselessness.

At the far end of the hall they discovered a chamber. Roald inspected the giant iron hinges, now grotesquely twisted lumps of rust, barely recognizable, where once huge doors had hung. 'Whatever wanted to get through the door that was here didn't seem willing to wait.'

Passing through the portal, Jimmy halted. 'Look at this.'

They faced what seemed a large hall, with faint echoes of ancient grandeur. Tapestries, now little more than shredded rags with no hint of colour, hung along the walls. Their torches cast flickering shadows upon the walls, giving the impression that ancient memories were awakening after aeons of sleep. What might have once been any number of recognizable things were now scattered piles of debris tossed about the hall. Splinters of wood, a twisted piece of iron, a single gold shard, all hinted at what might have once been, without revealing lost truths. The only intact object in the room was a



stone throne atop a raised dais halfway along the righthand wall. Martin approached and gently touched the centuries-old stone. 'Once a Valheru sat here. This was his seat of power.' As if remembering a dream, all in the hall were visited with a sense of how alien this place was. Millennia gone, the power of the Dragon Lord was still a faint presence. There was no mistaking it now: here they stood in the heart of an ancient race's legacy. This was a source of the moredhel dreams, one of the places of power along the Dark Path.

Roald said, "There's not much left. What caused this? Looters? The Dark Brotherhood?"

Martin looked about, as if seeing ages of history in the dust upon the walls. "I don't think so. From what I know of ancient lore, this may have endured from the time of the Chaos Wars." He indicated the utter destruction.

'They fought on the backs of dragons. They challenged the gods, or so legends say. Little that witnessed that struggle survived. We will probably never know the truth.' Jimmy had been scampering about the chamber, poking here and there. At last he returned and said, "Nothing growing here.'

'Then where is the Silverthorn?' Arutha asked bitterly. "We have looked everywhere.'

Everyone was silent for a long minute. Finally Jimmy said, "Not everywhere. We've looked around the lake, and' - he waved his hand around the hall - 'under the lake. But we haven't looked in the lake.'

'in the lake?' said Martin.

Jimmy said, "Calin and Galain said it grew very close to the edge of the water. So, had anyone thought to ask the elves if there have been heavy rains this year?"

Martin's eyes widened. "The water level's risen!"

"Anyone want to go swimming?" asked Jimmy.

Jimmy pulled his foot back. "it's cold," he whispered.

Martin said to Baru. 'City boy. He's seven thousand feet up in the mountains and he's surprised the lake's cold.'

Martin waded into the water, slowly, so as not to splash. Baru followed. Jimmy took a deep breath and followed, wincing every step as the water reached higher. When he stepped off a ledge, he plunged in up to his waist and opened his mouth in a silent gasp of pain. Upon the shore, Laurie winced in sympathy. Arutha and Roald kept watch for any sign of alarm on the bridge. All three crouched low, behind the gentle slope down to the water. The night was quiet, and most of the moredhel and human renegades slept on the far side of the bridge. They had decided to wait until the hours just before

dawn. It was likely the guards would be half-asleep if they were humans, and even moredhel were likely to make the assumption that nothing would occur just before sunrise.

Faint sounds of movement in the water were followed by a gasp as Jimmy ducked his head underwater for the first time and came right up again. Gulping air, he ducked back under. Like the others, he worked blind, feeling along. Suddenly his hand smarted as he stuck himself on something sharp among the moss-covered rocks. He came up with what seemed a noisy gasp, but nothing at the bridge indicated he was heard. Ducking under, he felt the slimy rocks. He located the thorny plant by sticking himself again, but he didn't jump up. He took two more punctures getting a grip on the plant and pulling, but suddenly it came up. Breaking the surface, he whispered 'I've got something.'

Grinning, he held up a plant that gleamed almost white in the light of the little moon. It looked like red berries stuck onto the branches of a rose branch with silver thorns. Jimmy turned it in appreciation. With a tiny "Ah" of triumph, he said, 'I've got it.'

Martin and Baru waded over and inspected the plant. 'Is this enough?' asked the Hadati.

Arutha said, 'The elves never told us. Get some more if you can, but we wait only a few more minutes.'

Gingerly he wrapped the plant in a cloth and stowed it in his pack.

In ten minutes they had found three more plants.

Arutha was convinced this was enough and signalled it was time to return to the cave. Jimmy, Martin, and Baru, dripping and chilled, hurried to the crevice and entered, with the others keeping watch.

Inside the cave, Arutha looked a man reborn as he inspected the plants under the faint light of a small brand Roald held aloft. Jimmy couldn't keep his teeth from chattering as he grinned at Martin. Arutha could not take his eyes from the plant. He marvelled at the odd sensations that coursed through his body as he regarded the branches with their silver thorns, red berries, and green leaves. For beyond the branches, in a place only he could see, he knew a soft laugh might be heard again, a soft hand might touch his face, and the embodiment of every happiness he had known might somehow be his again. Jimmy looked at Laurie. 'Damn me if I don't think we're going to do it.'

Laurie threw Jimmy his tunic. 'Now all we have to do is get back down.'

Arutha's head came up. 'Dress quickly. We leave at once.'

As Arutha breasted the rim of the canyon, Galain said, "I was about to pull the ropes up again. You cut it fine, Prince Arutha.'

"I thought it best to be down the mountain as soon as possible, rather than wait another day.'

"That I cannot argue,' agreed the elf. 'Last night there was some argument between the chief of the renegades and the moredhel leaders. I couldn't get close enough to hear, but as the dark ones and humans don't get along very well, I judge this arrangement soon to end. If that happens, this Murad may decide to cease waiting and begin looking once more.'

'Then we had best get as far from here as we can before light.'

Already the sky was turning grey as false dawn visited the mountains. Fortune was with them in part, for on this side of the mountains they would have shadows to hide within awhile longer than had they faced the sunrise. It would be only a little help, but any was welcome.

Martin, Baru, and Roald were quickly up the ropes.

Laurie struggled a little, not having the knack of climbing, a fact he had 'failed to mention to the others. With silent urging from his companions, he finally cleared the rim.

Jimmy scampered quickly upwards. The morning light was growing. Jimmy feared being seen against the rock face of the canyon should anyone move from the bridge.

In his haste, he became incautious and slipped on an outcropping, the toe of his boot skidding off the rock. He gripped the rope as he fell a few feet and grunted as he slammed into the face of the canyon. Then pain exploded along his side and he bit back a shout. Gasping silently for breath, he turned his back to the wall of the canyon.

With a spasm of movement he wrapped the rope under his left arm and gripped it tightly. Gingerly he reached inside his tunic and felt the knife he had pilfered from the dead man. When dressing, he had hastily returned it to his tunic rather than place it in his pack as he should have done. Now at least two inches of steel stuck in his side.

Keeping his voice in control, he whispered, "Pull me up.'

Jimmy nearly lost his grip with the first wave of pain that struck as they hauled the rope upwards. He slipped and gritted his teeth. Then he was over the rim.

'What happened?' asked the Prince.

"I got careless,' answered the boy. "Lift my tunic.'

Laurie did so and swore. Martin nodded at the boy, who returned the gesture. Then he pulled the knife and Jimmy almost fainted. Martin cut a section of a cloak and bound the boy's side. He motioned to Laurie and Roald, who supported the boy between them as they moved away from the canyon. As they hurried through the quickly brightening morning, Laurie said, "You just

couldn't do it the easy way, could you?'

They had managed to avoid detection while carrying Jimmy, for the first half of the day. The moredhel still did not know Moraelin had been invaded, and looked outwards, awaiting the approach of those who now sought to escape. But now they watched a moredhel lookout. He sat perched upon the outcropping that had caused so much trouble getting past before, and under which they must again pass. It was near noon, and they huddled down inside a depression, barely out of sight. Martin signalled to Galain, asking if the elf wanted to move first or second. The elf moved out, letting Martin follow. The afternoon was still, the day lacking even the slight breeze that had covered small movements when they had passed three nights earlier. Now it took all the skill the elf and Martin possessed to move a scant twenty feet without alerting the sentry. Martin nocked an arrow and took aim over Galain's shoulder. Galain pulled his hunting knife and rose up beside the moredhel. Galain tapped him on the shoulder. The dark elf spun at the unexpected contact, and Galain slashed his knife across his throat. The moredhel reared up and Martin's arrow took him in the chest. Galain grabbed him about the knees, lowering him back to his sitting position. He twisted Martin's arrow, breaking it off rather than trying to pull out the barb. In only moments the moredhel had been killed and still seemed at his post.

Martin and Galain ducked back down and faced the others. "He'll be discovered in a few hours. They may think us on our way in and search above us first, but then they'll be down the mountain. Now we must fly. We're two days to the outer reaches of the elver forests if we don't stop. Come.'

They scrambled down the trail, Jimmy wincing as he was half carried by Laurie. 'if the horses are still there,' muttered Roald.

.if they're not,' said Jimmy weakly, 'at least it's all downhill. '

They stopped only to let the horses get the minimal rest they required to survive a cross-country run. It would be likely the animals would not be usable after the dash, but that could not be helped. Arutha would let nothing prevent his return now that he possessed the means for Anita's cure. Before, he had been a man on the edge of despair, now a flame burned within, and he would let nothing extinguish it.

Through the night they rode.

Lathered, panting horses were led by exhausted riders

down the woodland trail. They had entered deep forest, still in the foothills of the mountains, but close to the boundary of the elver forests. Jimmy was half-conscious .from loss of blood, fatigue, and pain. The wound had 'opened again sometime during the night and he had been unable to do more than clutch his side. Then the boy's eyes rolled up and he fell face' down onto the trail. When he regained consciousness, he sat up, held by Laurie and Baru while Martin and Roald wrapped him in fresh bandages cut from Martin's cloak. 'This'll have to do until we reach Elvandar,' said Martin. Arutha said, 'if it opens again, say something. Galain, ride double with him, and don't let him fall off.' Once again they were in the saddle, and once again they endured the nightmare ride.

Near sundown of the second day, the first horse faltered. Martin put it down quickly and said, 'i'll run for a while.' For nearly three miles the Duke ran, though the fatigued horses' pace was slower than normal, this was still an impressive feat. Baru took to the trail for a while, then Galain, but still they were reaching their limit. The horses were reduced to a loping canter and trotting. Then they could only walk.

In silence they moved through the night, simply counting the passing yards as each minute took them closer to safety, knowing that, somewhere behind, the mute moredhel captain and his Black Slayers followed. Near morning they crossed a' small trail and Martin said, 'Here they must split forces, for they can't know we haven't turned east for Stone Mountain.'

Arutha said, "Everyone dismount.'

They did and the Prince said, 'Martin, lead the horses towards Stone Mountain for a while, then turn them loose. We'll continue on foot.'

Martin did as he was bidden while Baru masked the tracks of those on foot. Martin caught up with them an our later. As he ran down a woodland trail towards them, he said, "I think I heard something behind. I can't be sure. The wind is picking up and the noise was faint.' Arutha said, 'We continue towards Elvandar, but keep

alert for a defensible position.' He started a staggerlegged run, and the others took off after him, Jimmy supported in part by Martin.

For nearly an hour they half ran, half stumbled along, until the sounds of pursuit could be heard echoing through the woods. They felt a surge of energy as fear drove them onwards. Then Arutha pointed towards an outcropping of rock, in a semicircle that formed an almost perfect natural breastwork. He asked Galain, 'How far until

help?'

The elf studied the woods in the early morning light and said, "We are near the edge of our forests. My people will be an hour away, perhaps two."

Arutha quickly gave the elf the pack containing the Silverthorn and said, 'Take Jimmy. We'll hold them here until you return.' They all knew the pack was against the possibility the elf didn't return in time. At least Anita could still be cured.

Jimmy sat down on the rock. 'Don't be ridiculous. I would double the time he'll take to find help. I can fight standing still better than I can run.' With that he crawled over the stone breastwork and pulled out his dirk.

Arutha looked at the boy: tired, bleeding again, almost collapsing from fatigue and blood loss, but grinning at him while holding his dirk. Arutha gave a curt nod and the elf was off. Quickly they got behind the rocks, drew weapons, and waited.

For long minutes they huddled down behind the rocks, knowing that as each minute passed, their chances of rescue increased. Almost with each breath they could feel rescue and obliteration racing towards them. Chance as much as anything would determine their survival. If Calin and his warriors were waiting close to the edge of the forest, and Galain could quickly locate them, there was hope, if not, no hope. In the distance the sound of riders grew louder. Each moment passed slowly, each instant of possible discovery dragging by, and the agony of waiting increased. Then, in almost welcome relief, a shout was sounded and the moredhel were upon them. Martin rose up, his bow already drawn by the time he had a target. The first moredhel to see them was propelled backwards out of his saddle by the force of the arrow taking him in the chest. Arutha and the others made ready. A dozen moredhel riders milled about, startled at the sudden bow fire. Before they could react, Martin had another down. Three turned and rode away, but the others charged.

The outcropping reared up and spread out, making it impossible for the moredhel to overwhelm them, but they came at full gallop anyway, their horses' hooves making dull thunder upon the still-damp ground. Though they rode close to the necks of their horses, two more were taken by Martin's bow 'before they reached the stone redoubt. Then the moredhel were upon them. Baru leapt atop the rocks, his long sword a blur as he sliced through the air. A moredhel fell, his arm severed from his body. Arutha ran up and jumped from the rocks, dragging a Dark Brother from the saddle. The moredhel died under his knife. He spun in place, his rapier coming from its

sheath as another rider charged. The Prince stood his ground until the last, then with a sideways leap and a slash unseated the rider. A quick thrust, and the moredhel died.

Roald pulled one from his saddle and they both slid down into the protection of the rocks. Jimmy waited as they rolled about, then, when he saw an opening, another Dark Brother died as the boy used his dirk.

The two remaining saw Laurie and Martin ready, and chose to retreat. Both died as Martin's bow sang in the morning light. As soon as they were out of the saddle, Martin was over the rocks. He quickly scavenged the bodies and returned with a short bow and two quivers of arrows. 'I'm almost out,' he said, indicating his depleted quiver. 'These are no cloth-yard shafts, but I can use this little horse bow if I need.'

Arutha looked about. 'There'll be more along soon.'

"Do we run?" asked Jimmy.

'No. We would only gain a little, and we might not find a place nearly as defensible. We wait.'

Minutes passed and all waited with eyes turned towards the trail they knew the moredhel would use to attack them. Laurie whispered, 'Run, Galain, run.'

For what seemed an eternity the woods were silent.

Then in clouds of dust, with hooves pounding the ground, horsemen came into view.

The giant mute, Murad, rode in the van, a dozen Black Slayers behind him. Other moredhel and human renegades followed. Murad reined in, signalling for the others to halt.

Jimmy groaned. 'There's a hundred of them.'

Roald said, "Not a hundred, more like thirty.'

Laurie said, 'That's enough.'

Arutha looked over the rock, saying, "We may be able to hold for a few minutes.' They all knew it was hopeless.

Then Baru stood. And before anyone could prevent him, he started shouting at the moredhel, in a language unknown to Jimmy, the Prince, and Martin. Laurie and Roald shook their heads.

Arutha began to reach for the hillman, but Laurie said, 'Don't. He's challenging Murad to personal combat. A matter of honour.'

'Will he accept?'

Roald shrugged. 'They're a funny lot. I've fought the Dark Brothers before. Some of them are cut-throat renegades. But most are caught up in honour and ritual and the like. Depends on where you find them. If that lot's a gang of moss-troopers from north Yabon, they'll simply attack. But if Murad's got a band of old-fashioned deepforest Dark Brothers under his command, they may not take kindly to him saying no. If he's trying to show

some magic powers are backing him, he can't rightly refuse and keep their loyalty. But mostly it depends on what Murad thinks about matters of honour.'

'Whatever's the outcome, Baru's thrown them into confusion,' observed Martin.

Arutha could see the moredhel standing about while the mute stared impassively at Baru. Then Murad waved his hand towards baru and the others. A moredhel in a cloak rode forward, turning his horse to face Murad, and said something in a questioning tone.

The mute motioned again, and the moredhel who confronted him waved the other away. The moredhel riders, except for those wearing black armour, retreated their mounts several yards. One of the humans rode up and turned his horse to face Murad. He shouted something at the moredhel leader, several other humans behind echoing the tones.

'Martin,' said Arutha, 'can you make out what's being said?'

'No. But whatever it is, it isn't flattering, that's for certain.'

Suddenly Murad drew his own sword and struck the offending human. Another human shouted something and seemed ready to ride forward, but two moredhel rode to intercept him. With a sullen expression the first brigand turned his horse and rode back to join the other humans.

Murad again gestured towards the humans, and charged his horse.

Baru leapt from the rocks and ran a short way forward to take up position. He stood his ground, his sword drawn back to strike. As the horse was almost upon him,

Baru lashed out with a circling step that took him from harm's way, and the horse nickered in pain as it stumbled. The wounded animal went down. Murad, despite his bulk, rolled from the falling animal and came up, sword still in hand. He was quick and turned in time to meet Baru's attack. The two combatants clashed, steel ringing on steel.

Arutha looked about. The dozen Black Slayers waited quietly, though for how long Arutha did not know. With Murad involved in a matter of honour, they might wait until the issue was decided. The Prince fervently hoped so.

All eyes watched. Martin said, 'Don't let down your guard. As soon as this is over, either way, they'll hit us again.'

'At least I can catch my breath,' said Jimmy.

Arutha surveyed the area. Twenty more moredhel were approaching the area. All Baru did was buy them time.



Murad struck out and was struck in return. Within minutes both combatants were a mass of bleeding wounds, testimony to how each was able almost to deliver a death blow, but not quite. Cut and parry, lunge and riposte, slash and dodge, the struggle went on. The Hadati was equal in height to the moredhel, but the dark elf bulked larger. With a series of overhead, clubbing blows, Murad began to drive Baru back.

Martin brought his sword to the ready. "Baru's tiring. it'll be over soon."

But like a dancer timing his moves to the music, Baru let Murad fall into a pattern. Up and down the sword rose and fell, then, when it was rising, Baru ceased his retreat, instead stepping forward and to the side. With a sweeping cut, he sliced Murad's ribs. It was a deep cut that bled fiercely.

'That's a surprise,' Martin said calmly.

"Damn fine move," said Roald in professional appreciation.

But Murad didn't let the surprising blow finish him. He turned in place and grabbed the Hadati's sword arm. Murad was off balance, but he pulled Baru down with him. They grappled and rolled down the hill towards the rocks where Arutha stood. Weapons slipped from bloodwet fingers and the two combatants struck at each other with fists.

Then they were up again, but Murad had his arms about Baru's waist. Hoisting the Hadati into the air, the moredhel placed interlocked hands in the small of Baru's back, squeezing to break his spine. Baru's head went back as he cried out in pain. Then he brought his hands together in a thunderous slap over the moredhel's ears, rupturing his eardrums.

Murad gave a warbling, gurgling cry of pain as he dropped Baru. The creature covered his ears with his hands, blinded by pain for a moment. Baru reared back and struck the moredhel in the face with his fist, a staggering blow that pulped Murad's nose, broke some teeth, and split his lip.

Again Baru struck him in the face, jerking his head back, and again. The Hadati seemed on the verge of clubbing the moredhel to death. But Murad gripped Baru's wrist and pulled him down, and again they rolled upon the ground.

Then Murad was atop Baru, and each had his hands around the other's neck. With grunts of pain and exertion, the two began choking each other.

Jimmy reached down and took a dagger from the body of the dead moredhel at his feet, to supplement his dirk.

Martin said, 'Soon. Soon.'

Murad bore down with all his weight, his face turning

red, as did Baru's. Neither could breathe, and it was only a question of who succumbed first. Baru bore the bulk of

the moredhel atop him, but Murad had a deep wound in his side, which still bled, weakening him as every second passed.

Then, with a grunt and sigh, Murad fell forwards onto Baru. There was silence in the woods for a long moment before Murad moved. With a roll he fell over, off Baru. The Hadati slowly rose. Taking a knife from the moredhel's own belt, he slowly cut Murad's throat. Sitting back upon his heels, Baru breathed deeply. Then, with deliberate contempt for his own danger, he plunged his knife deep into Murad's chest.

'What's he doing?' asked Roald.

Martin said, "Remember what Tatham said about the Black Slayers. He's cutting Murad's heart out, just in case he might try to rise again.'

More moredhel and renegades had joined the company overlooking the combat, and now more than fifty riders watched the Hadati butcher the moredhel chieftain. The Hadati cut down into the chest, then his hand plunged deep within the wound and with a single jerk he pulled Murad's heart free. Holding his hand up, so that all might see, he showed the assembled moredhel and humans that Murad's heart beat no longer. Then he tossed it aside and rose drunkenly to his feet.

With a staggering, wobbling run, he tried for the rocks, only ten yards away. A moredhel rider moved to strike him from the side, and Jimmy threw his dagger. The point took the creature in the eye, causing him to scream as he fell back out of the saddle. But another came at Baru and cut at him. The sword took him in the side, and the Hadati fell forward.

'Damn you!' shouted Jimmy, near tears. 'He won. You could have let him come back!' He threw his dirk, but the other rider dodged. The moredhel who had struck Baru stiffened and turned, and Arutha and his companions saw an arrow in his back. Another moredhel shouted something as he put away his bow. This brought an angry shout from a third and one of the humans.

"What is all this?' asked Arutha.

Roald said, 'The one who killed BARu is a renegade: no honour. That fellow on the horse seems to have had the same opinion as Jimmy. The Hadati won, he should have been allowed to return to die with his companions. Now the slayer, another renegade, and the human bandits are all shouting at one another. We might gain a little time, or at least have some of them quit, now that their big chieftain is dead.'

Then the Black Slayers charged.

Martin reared up and began firing. The archer's speed was phenomenal, and three riders were unhorsed before they reached the rock abutment.

Steel clashed upon steel and the battle was joined.

Roald leapt atop the rock, as had Baru before, and his sword also struck out at all who came within his reach.

No moredhel could ride in close enough to strike him with their short swords, while his broadsword delivered death to whoever rode within reach.

Arutha parried a blow aimed at Laurie, then struck upwards from a crouch to take a rider. Roald leapt and dragged one from the saddle and clubbed him with the hilt of his sword. Seven moredhel died before the others withdrew.

Arutha said, 'They didn't all charge.'

The others could see that some of the moredhel had held back, and others were still arguing, along with two human renegades. A few of the Black Slayers were still mounted, and they were ignoring what transpired with their companions, forming for another charge.

Jimmy liberated another dagger from a moredhel just at the edge of the rocks, then noticed something. He tugged at Martin's sleeve. "See that ugly-looking fellow with the fancy red breastplate and all those gold rings and things?"

Martin saw such a one sitting at the head of the human riders. 'Yes.'

'Can you kill him now?'

"It's a difficult shot. Why?"

'Because as sure as there's elves in the woods, that's Reitz. He's captain of that band of outlaws. You knock him off and the others will most likely run away, or at least keep holding back until a new captain's elected.'

Martin rose up, took aim, and let fly. The shaft sped between the boles of the trees and took the indicated rider in the throat. With a snap his head came up and he somersaulted backwards out of his saddle.

'Amazing, said Jimmy.

Martin said, 'I had to clear the top of that breastplate.'

Laurie said dryly, 'Not very sporting, shooting without warning.'

'You may convey my apologies,' said Martin. 'I forgot you singers always have the heroes acting that way in your sagas.'

'if we're the heroes,' said Jimmy, 'the outlaws should run away.'

True to Jimmy's prediction, the human renegades began muttering among themselves, and were suddenly riding away. One moredhel shouted after them angrily, then waved another attack upon the Prince's party.

Another moredhel spat on the ground before the 'first and turned his horse, motioning some companions away as well. Twenty or so rode after the humans.~

Arutha counted. cFewer than twenty this time, and the Slayers.'

The riders dismounted, including those who had held back during the previous attack. They had discovered they couldn't close in to the 'rocks while on horseback. They ran close, using the trees as cover and fanned out, to surround Arutha's position.

Roald said, 'This is what they should have done the first time. ' "They're a little slow, but not entirely stupid,' commented Laurie.

Jimmy clutched his dagger as the Dark Brothers charged. 'i'd have preferred stupidity.'

The moredhel came in a wave, and suddenly there was fighting on all sides. Jimmy leapt away as a sword came crashing down from above. He thrust upwards with his dagger and took the moredhel in the stomach.

Roald and Laurie battled, back to back, surrounded by Dark Brothers. Martin shot until he was out of arrows, when he grabbed up the moredhel bow and arrows. His firing was rapid and accurate and a dozen more Dark Brothers were struck before he dropped the bow and pulled his sword.

Arutha fought like a man possessed, his rapier delivering injury at every quarter. No moredhel could get close and remain free of wounds. But the Prince knew time would eventually win. The defenders would fatigue and slow and then they would die.

Arutha could feel the strength drain from his arms as the certainty of death came to him. There was little point in hoping. There were more than twenty moredhel still standing, and they were but five.

Martin hewed with his sword, cutting all who came before him. Roald and Laurie lunged and parried, giving up only inches, but slowly being worn down by the attackers.

A moredhel leapt over the stone breastwork and spun to face Jimmy. Jimmy acted without hesitation, his stiff side slowing him only slightly. He lashed out and sliced the moredhel's hand, causing it to drop its sword. The Dark Brother yanked its belt knife loose as Jimmy slashed again. But the moredhel leapt back, avoiding the boy's cut. Then it closed and was upon Jimmy. The boy slashed wildly, losing his balance and his knife, and the moredhel was atop him. A knife blade came rushing towards the boy's face, but he dodged and it struck rock. Jimmy gripped at the creature's wrist, holding the blade away. The blade came towards his face, for the weakened boy could not hold back the moredhel's superior strength.

Then the moredhel's head snapped backwards and Jimmy could see a knife drawn across the dark elf's throat, leaving a bloody track. The moredhel was pulled off by the hand gripping his hair, then the hand was extended to Jimmy.

Galain stood over the boy and helped him to his feet. Stunned, Jimmy looked about. Hunting horns sounded in the forests and the air was filled with arrows. The moredhel retreated before the attacking elves.

Martin and Arutha dropped their weapons, slumping in exhaustion. Roald and Laurie collapsed where they stood. Calin ran towards them, directing his elver warriors in pursuit.

Arutha looked up, relief bringing tears unbidden to his eyes. In a hoarse voice he said, 'is it over?'

Calin said, 'It is, Arutha. For a while. They'll be back, but by then we will all be safely within the boundary of our forests. Unless they plan invasion, the moredhel will not cross that border. Our magic is still too strong there.' An elf leant over the body of Baru. 'Calin. this one still lives!'

Martin lay back on the rocks, panting. 'That Hadati is tough.'

Arutha waved away Galain's hand as he stood, his legs feeling like water. 'How far?'

'Less than a mile. We need only to cross a small stream, and we are in our forests.'

Slowly the survivors of the attack felt a lifting of their hopelessness, for they knew their chances now were excellent. With the elver escort, it would be unlikely the moredhel would muster enough strength to overwhelm them, even should they mount another attack. And with Murad dead, it was likely their leadership would crumble. From the behaviour of many of the Dark Brothers it was clear he had been of major importance to them. His death would surely weaken Murmandamus's plans for some time.

Jimmy hugged himself, wondering at the chill he felt, for suddenly he was returned to the moment he stood in the cave at Moraelin. He felt the strange dislocation in time, and knew where he had experienced that chill before - twice before, in the palace and in the cellar of the House of Willows. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end and knew with dread certainty that some magic was being visited upon them. He leapt away from the rock and looked about the glade. Pointing, he shouted, 'Then we'd better start now. look!'

The body of a Black Slayer began to move.

Martin said, 'Can we cut their hearts out?'

'Too late,' cried Laurie. 'They're armoured, and we should have acted at once.'

A dozen Black Slayers were slowly rising and turning to face Arutha's party, weapons in hand. With tentative steps they began to advance upon the Prince. Calin shouted orders and elves grabbed up the near-exhausted and wounded men. Two carried Baru between them, and they started to run.

The dead warriors staggered after, their wounds still bleeding, and as they moved, their movements smoothed out, as if some agency was perfecting its control over them.

With increasing speed the undead followed. Elver bowmen ran, halted, turned, and fired, to no effect. The shafts struck the dead moredhel and would rock them, knocking a few to the ground, but they would only rise again.

Jimmy looked back, and somehow the view of these creatures running through the bright morning light in the lovely forests was far more horrible than anything he had seen at the palace or in the sewers of Krondor. Their movements were surprisingly smooth as they ran after, weapons at the ready.

Those elves carrying the injured and fatigued humans kept running while Calin ordered others to slow the moredhel. Elver warriors drew swords and engaged the undead creatures, after a few parries, they would retreat. The rear guard slowed the Black Slayers, but they could not be halted.

The elves worked themselves into a pattern. They would turn, fight, retreat a little, fight again, then flee. But the inability to visit harm on their foes served only to delay these, not to end their threat. Panting, fatigued elves laboured to halt an inexorable flood. After several minutes the humans were being half carried, half dragged across a small stream.

Calin said, 'We enter our forests. Here we will stand.'

The elves drew swords and waited. Arutha, Martin, Laurie, and Roald readied weapons and waited. The first moredhel entered the water, sword in hand, splashing towards them. He reached the shore as an elf made ready to strike, but the moment the undead creature placed his foot upon the shore, it seemed to sense something behind the elves. The elf struck it to no effect, but the dead Black Slayer staggered back, raising its hands, as if seeking protection.

Suddenly a rider sped past the defenders, a figure resplendent in white and gold. Upon the back of a white elf steed, a legendary mystic horse of Elvandar, Tomas charged the moredhel. The elf steed reared, and Tomas leapt down from its back and, with a golden arc of his sword, nearly split the Black Slayer in twain.

Like a raging flame incarnate, Tomas sped along the

shore, visiting destruction upon each Black Slayer as they set foot across the stream. Despite their arcane origin, each was helpless before the combined might of his arm and Valheru power. Several managed single blows, which he easily turned aside, answering with terrible swiftness. His golden sword lashed out and black armour was cracked as if little more than brittle hide. But none of the undead sought to flee. Each came on, and each was quickly dispatched. Of those with Arutha, only Martin alone had seen Tomas in battle before, and even he had never seen such a display. Soon it was over, and only Tomas stood upon the edge of the stream. Then came the sound of more horses. Arutha looked behind and saw more elf steeds approaching, ridden by Tathar and the other Spellweavers.

Tathar said, 'Greetings, Prince of Krondor.'

Arutha looked up and smiled weakly. "Thanks to you all."

Tomas resheathed his sword and said, 'I could not travel with you, but once these dared cross the boundaries of our forest, I could act. Elvandar is mine to preserve. Any who dares invade will be treated as these.' To Calin he said, 'Build a funeral pyre. Those black demons shall never rise again.' And he said to the others, 'When it is done, we shall return to Elvandar.'

Jimmy fell back upon the grass of the stream bank, his body too sore and tired to move. Within moments he was asleep.

They feasted the next night. Queen Aglaranna and Prince Tomas hosted Arutha and his companions. Galain approached where Martin and Arutha sat and said, 'Baru will live. Our healer says he's the toughest human he's seen.'

'How long before he's up again?' asked Arutha.

'A long time,' said Galain. 'You'll have to leave him with us. By rights he should have died an hour before we got here. He's lost a lot of blood, and some of those cuts are severe. Murad almost crushed his spine and his windpipe.'

'But other than that, he'll be as good as new,' said Roald across the table.

Laurie said, 'When I get home to Carline, I promise never to leave again.'

Jimmy came to sit next to the Prince. "You look thoughtful for one who's pulled off the best in possible. I'd thought you'd be happy."

Arutha ventured a smile. 'I won't be until Anita is cured.'

'When do we ride home?'

'We go to Crydee in the morning, the elves will escort us there. Then we take ship to Krondor. We should be

back in time for the Festival of Banapis. If Murmandamus can't find me with his magic, a ship should be safe enough. Unless you'd prefer riding back the way we came?'

Jimmy said, 'Not likely. There might still be more of those Black Slayers about. I'll take drowning over another run-in with them, anytime.'

Martin said, 'It will be good to see Crydee again. I'll have much to see to, getting my house in order. Old Samuel will be at wits' end with the estate management, though I'm sure the Baron Bellamy has done well enough running things in my absence. But there will be much to do before we leave.'

'Leave for where?' said Arutha.

In an innocent tone Martin said, 'Why for Krondor, of course.' But his gaze travelled northwards, and silently he echoed his brother's thoughts. Up there was Murmandamas, and a battle yet unjoined. The issue was not decided, only the first skirmish. With the death of Murad the forces of the Darkness had lost a captain, had been pushed back, retiring in disorder, but they were not vanquished, and they would return, if not tomorrow, then some other day.

Arutha said, 'Jimmy, you have acted with wit and bravery beyond what is required of a squire. What reward shall you have?'

Bitting a large rib of elk, the boy replied, 'Well, you still need a Duke of Krondor.'

19.

Continuation

The riders reined in.

Staring upwards, they studied the mountaintops that marked the boundary of their lands, the great peaks of the High Wall. For two weeks twelve riders had picked their way through the mountains, until they had journeyed beyond the normal limits of Tsurani patrols, above the timberline. They moved slowly through a pass it had taken days to locate. They were seeking something no Tsurani had searched for in ages, a way through the High Wall into the northern tundra.

It was cold in the mountains, an alien experience for most of the riders, except those who had served on Midkemia during the years of the Riftwar. To the younger soldiers of the Shinzawai Household Guard, this cold was a strange and almost frightening thing. But they showed no sign of their discomfort, except to absently draw their cloaks more tightly about their shoulders as they studied the odd whiteness on the peaks, hundreds of feet yet



above their heads. They were Tsurani.

Pug, still in the black robes of a Great One, turned to his companion. 'A short way from here, I think, Hokanu.' The young officer nodded and signalled his patrol forward. For weeks the younger son of the Lord of the Shinzawai had led this escort beyond the limits of the Empire's northern borders. Following the river Gagajin to its highest source, a nameless lake in the mountains, the hand-picked warriors had passed the trails followed by patrols of the Empire of Tsuranuanni. Here were the wild, rock-strewn, seemingly desolate lands between the Empire and the tundra of the north, home of the ThUn nomads. Even with a Great One in attendance, Hokanu felt vulnerable. Should a Thun tribe be migrating nearby when they came out of the mountains, there would be a score or more of their young warriors running as flankers, seeking any excuse to take a Tsurani head as a trophy. They rounded a bend in the trail and a narrow gap in the mountains provided a glimpse of the lands beyond. For the first time they could see the vast expanse of the tundra. Vaguely perceived in the distance, a long, low white barrier could be made out. 'What is that?' said pug.

Hokanu shrugged, his face an implacable Tsurani mask. 'I do not know, Great One. I suspect it is another range of mountains, across the tundra. Or perhaps it is that thing you described, the wall of ice.'

'A glacier.'

Hokanu said, 'Whatever, it lies to the north, where you said the Watchers may be.'

Pug looked behind him at the ten silent riders. Then he . asked, 'How far?'

Hokanu laughed. 'Farther than we can ride in another month without starving. We shall have to stop to hunt.'

'I doubt there is a great deal of game about.'

'More than one would think, Great One. The Thun struggle to reach their traditional southern ranges every winter, the lands we have held for over a thousand years, but they still somehow survive the winters here. Those of us who have wintered on your world know how to forage in snow country. There will be creatures like your rabbits and deer once we drop back down below the timberline. We shall survive.'

Pug weighed his choices. After a moment of silent consideration he said, 'I don't think so, Hokanu. You may be right, but if what I hope to find is only a legend, then we shall have all come for no good reason. I may return to your father's home by my arts, and I could manage to take a few of you with me, three or even four, but the rest? No, I think it is time for a parting.'

Hokanu began to object, for his father had ordered

him to protect Pug, but Pug wore the black robe. "Your will, Great One.' He signalled to his men. "Pass up half your food.' He said to Pug, 'There will be enough here to keep you fed for a few more days if you eat sparingly, Great One.' When the food had been gathered in two large travel bags and hung behind Pug's saddle, Hokanu motioned his men to wait.

The magician and the officer rode forward a short way, and the son of the Shinzawai said, "Great One, I have given thought to the warning You bring and your quest.' He seemed to find it difficult to speak his mind. 'You have brought much into my family's life, not all of it good, but like my father, I've always believed you .to be a man of honour, one without guile. If you believe this legendary Enemy to be the cause behind all the troubles on your homeworld you have spoken of, and if you think it about to find your world and ours, I must also believe. I admit to fear, Great One. I am ashamed.'

Pug shook his head. "There is no shame, Hokanu. The Enemy is something beyond any of our understanding. I know you think it a thing of legend, something spoken of when you were a small boy and your teachers began to instruct you in the history of the Empire. Even I, who have seen it in mystic vision, even I do not fathom it, save to count it the greatest threat to our worlds imaginable. No, Hokanu, there is no shame. I fear its coming. I fear its power, and its madness, for it is a thing mindless in rage and hate. I doubt the sanity of any who did not fear it.'

Hokanu lowered his head in agreement, then looked the magician in the eyes. 'Milamber . . . Pug. I thank you for the ease you brought to my father.' He spoke of the message Pug had carried from Kasumi. "May the gods of both worlds watch over you, Great One.' He bowed his head as a sign of respect and then silently turned his mount around.

In a short while Pug sat alone atop the pass through which no Tsurani had ridden in ages. Below him lay the forests of the north slope of the High Wall, and beyond them the ranges of the Thun.

And beyond the tundra? A dream or legend perhaps. The alien creatures seen briefly in a vision each magician endured as he passed his final testing for the black robe. Those creatures known only as the Watchers. It was Pug's hope they possessed some knowledge of the Enemy, some knowledge that might prove the difference in the coming battle. For as Pug sat atop his tired mount, on the wind-swept heights of the greatest mountains on Kelewan's largest continent, he was certain some great struggle had begun, a struggle that could mean the destruction of two worlds.

Pug urged his horse forward, and the animal began

moving downwards, towards the tundra and the unknown.

Pug pulled back on the reins. Since leaving Hokanu's patrol he had seen nothing in the hills as he rode down towards the tundra. Now, a day out of the foothills, a band of Thun were speeding to meet him. The centaurlike creatures hooted their battle songs as they ran, their powerful hooves beating the tundra in rhythmic concussion. But unlike the legendary centaur, the upper portion of this creature looked as if some form of lizard had grown to man shape above the torso of a heavy horse or mule. Like all other native life forms on Kelewan, they were hexspedal, and as with the other intelligent native race, the insectoid cho-ja, the upper limbs had developed into arms. Unlike humans, they had six fingers. Pug waited quietly until the Thun were almost upon him, then he erected a mystic barrier and watched as they crashed into it. The Thun were all large, warrior males, though Pug couldn't really imagine what a female of the species must look like. Still, these creatures, for all their alien appearance, acted as Pug would have expected young human warriors to act under the same circumstance, confused and angry. Several beat ineffectively against the barrier while the others retreated a short way off to observe. Then Pug removed the cape the Shinzawai lord had given him for the journey. Through the haze of the mystic barrier, one of the young Thun saw him wearing the black robe and shouted to his companions. They turned and fled.

For three days they followed him at a respectful distance. Some ran off, and for a time those remaining were joined by other Thun. This leaving and returning, with some Thun always behind him, continued unabated. At night, Pug erected a circle of protection about himself and his mount, and when he awoke the next morning, the Thun still watched. Then, on the fourth day, the Thun finally made peaceful contact.

A single Thun trotted towards him, awkwardly holding his hands above his head, palms together in the Tsurani parley sign. Pug could see as he came up to him that they had sent an elder.

'Honours to your tribe,' said Pug, hoping the creature could speak Tsurani.

An almost human chuckle answered. "A first that is, black one. Never honour have man given to me.' The speech was heavily accented, but understandable, and the strange, saurian features were surprisingly expressive. The Thun was unarmed, but old scars showed it had once been a powerful warrior. Now age had robbed it of much of its vigour.

Pug expressed a suspicion. 'You are the sacrifice?'

'My life is yours to take. Bring down your sky fire, if that is your wish. But not, I think, your wish.' Again the chuckle. "Black ones the Thun have faced. And why a one near the age of leaving should you take, when sky fire can a whole band burn? No, you move for Purposes your own, do you not? Troubling those soon left to face the ice hunters, the pack killers, a purpose of yours is not.' Pug studied the Thun. He was almost at the day when he would be too old to keep pace with the moving band, when the tribe would abandon him to the predators of the tundra.

'Your age brings wisdom. I have no contention with the Thun. I simply seek to pass to the north.'

'Thun a Tsurani word. We are Lasura, the people. Black ones have I seen. You a troublesome lot. Fight almost won, then black ones sky fire bring. Tsurani fight bravely, and Tsurani head a great trophy is, but black 'ones? Leaving Lasura in peace, your business'usually is not. Why our ranges seek you to cross?'

'There is a grave danger, from ages long gone. It is a danger to all on Kelewan, to Thun as well as Tsurani. I think there are those who may know how that danger may be met, those who live high in the ice.' He pointed to the north.

The old warrior reared up, like a startled horse, and Pug's own mount shied away. "Then, mad black one, northwards go. Death waits there. Find that out you shall. Those who in the ice live none welcome, and the Lasura no contest with madmen seek. Those who do a mad one harm are by the gods harm done. Touched by the gods you are.' He dashed off.

Pug felt both relief and fear. For the Thun to know 'those who live in the ice' showed there was a chance the Watchers were neither fiction nor long vanished into the past. But the Thun's warning caused him to fear for his mission. What waited for him high in the ice of the north? Pug moved away as the Thun band vanished over the horizon. Winds blew down off the ice, and he pulled his cloak about him. Never had he felt this alone.

More weeks had passed, and the horse had died. It was not the first time Pug had subsisted on horsemeat. Pug used his arts to transport' himself short distances, but mostly he walked. Vagueness about time disturbed him more than any danger. He had no sense of the Enemy's imminent attack. For all he knew, the Enemy might need years to actually enter Midkemia. Whatever else, he knew it couldn't still possess the power it displayed in the vision of the time of the golden bridge , otherwise it would have swept into Midkemia and no power on the planet could have stopped it.

Pug's routine became dully monotonous as he continued northwards. He would walk until he topped some slight rise and would fix his vision on a distant point. With concentration, he could transport himself there, but it was tiring and a little dangerous. Fatigue dulled the mind, and any mistake in the spell used to gather the energy needed to move him could cause him harm, or even kill him. So he would walk, until he felt sufficiently alert and at a place conducive to such spell casting. Then one day he had seen something strange in the distance. An odd feature seemed to rear up above the icy cliff. It appeared vague, too far away to be seen clearly. He sat down. There was a spell of far seeing, one used by magicians of the Lesser Path. He remembered it as if he had read it a moment before, a faculty of his mind that had somehow been enhanced by his torture by the Warlord and the odd spell fashioned to keep him from his magic. But he lacked the strenuous stimulation, the fear of death, that had allowed him to use a Lesser Magic, and he could not cause the spell to work for him. Sighing, he stood and began again to trudge northwards.

For three days he had seen the ice spire, rising high into the sky above the leading edge of a great glacier. Now he trudged up to a high rise and gauged his distance. Transporting himself without a known location, a pattern to focus his mind upon, was dangerous unless he could see his destination. He picked a small outcropping of rock before what seemed to be an entrance and incanted a spell.

Suddenly he stood before what was clearly a door into an ice tower, fashioned by some arcane art. At the door appeared a robed figure. It moved silently and with grace, and was tall, but nothing of its features could be seen in the deep dark of its hood.

Pug waited and said nothing. The Thun were obviously frightened of these creatures, and while Pug had little fear for himself, a blunder could cost him the only source of aid he could think of to help stem the Enemy. Still, he was ready to defend himself instantly if necessary.

As winds whipped snowflakes in swirls about him, the robed figure motioned for Pug to follow and turned back into the door. Pug hesitated a moment, then followed the robed figure into the spire.

Inside the spire were stairs, carved into its walls. The spire itself seemed to be fashioned from ice, but somehow there was no cold here, in fact, the spire seemed almost warm after the bitter wind of the tundra. The stairs led up, towards the pinnacle of the spire, and down, into the ice. The figure was vanishing down the stairs, almost out of sight when Pug entered. Pug followed. They descended

what seemed an impossible distance , as if their destination lay far below the glacier. When they halted, Pug was certain they were many hundreds of feet below the surface.

At the bottom of the stairs they came to a large door, fashioned from the same warm ice as the walls. The figure moved through the door, and again Pug followed. What he saw on the other side caused him to halt, dumbfounded.

Below the mighty edifice of ice, in the frozen wastes of the Arctic of Kelewan, was a forest. Moreover, it was a forest like none upon Kelewan, and Pug's heart raced as he beheld mighty oaks and elms, ash and pine. Dirt, not ice, lay under his boots, and all around a soft, gentle light was diffused by the green branches and flowers. Pug's guide pointed towards a path and again took the lead. Deep in the forest they came to a large clearing. Pug had never seen the like of the sight before him, but he knew there was another place, a far distant place, that looked much as this did. In the centre of the clearing, gigantic trees rose, with mighty platforms erected amid them, connected by roads upon the backs of branches. Silver, white, gold, and green leaves all seemed to glow with mystic light.

Pug's guide raised his hands to his hood and slowly lowered it. Pug's eyes widened in wonder, for before him stood a creature unmistakable to one reared upon Midkemia. Pug's expression was one of open disbelief and he was nearly speechless. Before him stood an old elf, who with a slight smile said, 'Welcome to Elvardein, Milamber of the Assembly. Or would you prefer to be Called Pug of Crydee? We have been expecting you.' 'I prefer Pug,' he half whispered. He was able to muster up only a shred of his composure, so shocked was he to find Midkemia's second most ancient race living among this impossible forest, deep in the ice of an alien planet.

'What is this place? Who are you, and how did you know I was coming here?'

'We know many things, son of Crydee. You are here because it is time for you to face that greatest of terrors, what you call the Enemy. You are here to learn. We are here to teach.'

"Who are you?"

The elf motioned Pug towards a gigantic platform.

"There is much you must learn. A year shall you abide with us, and when you leave, you will come to power and understanding you only glimpse now. Without that teaching, you will not be able to survive the coming battle. With it, you may save two worlds.' Nodding as Pug moved forwards, the elf fell in beside him. "We are a

race of elvenkind long vanished from Midkemia. We are the eldest race of that world, servants to the Vallheru, those whom men called the Dragon Lords. Long ago did we come to this world, and for reasons you shall learn we chose to abide here. We watch for the return of that which has brought you to us. We prepare against the day we see the return of the Enemy. We are the eldar.' Stunned by this, Pug could only wonder. Silently he entered the twin of the city of elves, Elvandar, the place deep in the ice that the eldar had called Elvardein.

Arutha strode down the hall. Lyam walked at his side. Behind them hurried Volney, Father Nathan, and Father Tully. Fannon, Gardan and Kasumi, Jimmy and Martin, Roald and Dominic, Laurie and Carline all followed in a pack. The Prince still had on the stained and tattered travel clothing he had worn on the ship from Crydee. They had had a fast, and blessedly uneventful, journey. Two guards still waited without the room Pug had ensorcelled. Arutha motioned for them to open the door. When it was open, he waved them aside, and with the hilt of his sword, he smashed the seal as Pug had instructed.

The Prince and the two priests hurried to the Princess's bedside. Lyam and Volney kept the rest outside. Nathan opened the vial containing the curative fashioned by the elver Spellweavers. As instructed, he poured a drop upon Anita's lips. For a moment nothing happened, then the Princess's lips flickered. Her mouth moved, and she licked the drop from her lips. Tully and Arutha held her up, Nathan raised the vial to her mouth and poured. She drank it all.

Before their eyes colour returned to Anita's cheeks. As Arutha knelt at her side, her eyes fluttered and opened. She turned her head slightly, and said, 'Arutha,' in almost a silent whisper. Her hand gently came and touched his cheek as tears of thanks ran unashamedly down his face. He took her hand and kissed it.

Then Lyam and the others were in the room. Father Nathan rose and Tully barked, "only a minute, now! She has to rest."

Lyam laughed, his loud happy laugh. "Listen to him. Tully, I'm still the King."

Tully said, 'They may make you Emperor of Kesh, King of Queg, and Grand Master of the Brothers of the Shield of Dala as well, for all I care. To me you'll always be one of my less-gifted students. A moment, then out you go.' He turned away, but as with the others, his face was wet.

The Princess Anita looked around at all the smiling faces and said, 'What happened?' She sat up and with a

wince said, 'Oh, I hurt,' then smiled an embarrassed smile. "Arutha, what did happen? All I remember was turning to you at the wedding . . .'

'I'll explain later. You rest, and I'll see you again soon.'

She smiled and yawned, covering her mouth. 'Excuse me. But I am sleepy.' She snuggled down and was soon asleep.

Tully began shooing them from the room. Outside, Lyam said, 'Father, how soon before we can finish this wedding?'

'In a few days,' said Tully. 'The restorative powers of that mixture are phenomenal.'

"Two weddings,' said Carline.

Lyam said, "I was going to wait until we returned to Rillanon.'

'Not on your best horse's rump,' snapped Carline. "I'm taking no chances.' 'Well, Your Grace,' said the King to Laurie, 'I guess

it's been decided.'

Laurie said, "'Your Grace"?''

With a laugh and a wave, as he walked away, Lyam said, 'Of course, didn't she tell you? I can't have my sister married to a commoner. I'm naming you Duke of Salador.'

Laurie looked more shaken than before. "Come along, love,' said Carline, taking him by the hand. 'You'll survive. '

Arutha and Martin laughed, and Martin said, 'Have you noticed the peerage has been going to hell lately?' Arutha turned to Roald. 'You were in this for gold, but my thanks go beyond mere gold. A bonus you shall have. Volney, this man is to have a bag of a hundred gold sovereigns, our agreed-upon price. Then he is to have ten times that as bonus. And then another thousand for thanks.'

Roald grinned. 'You are generous, Highness.'

"And if you'll accept, you're welcome to be my guest

here as long as you wish. You might even find it in your heart to consider joining my guard. I've a captaincy about to open.'

Roald saluted. 'Thanks, but no, Your Highness. I've thought of late it was time to settle down, especially after this last business, but I have no ambitions to enlist.'

"Then feel free to guest with us as long as you desire.

I'll instruct the Royal Steward to prepare a suite for your use . '

With a grin, Roald said, "My thanks, Highness.'

Gardan said, 'Does that remark about a new captaincy



mean I'm finally done with this duty and can return to Crydee with His Grace?'

Arutha shook his head. "Sorry, Gardan. Sergeant Valdis will become captain of my guard, but no retirement for you yet. From those reports of Pug's you brought from Stardock, I'm going to need you around. Lyam is about to name you Knight-Marshal of Krondor.'

Kasumi clapped Gardan upon the back. 'Congratulations, Marshal.'

Gardan said, 'But . . .'

Jimmy cleared his throat in expectation. Arutha turned and said, 'Yes, Squire?'

cWell, I thought . . .'

'You had something to ask?'

Jimmy looked from Arutha's face to Martin's. "Well just thought as long as you were passing out rewards . . .'

'Oh yes, of course.' Turning, Arutha spotted one of the squires and shouted, "Locklear!"

The young squire came running to bow before his Prince. 'Highness?'

'Escort Squire Jimmy back to Master deLacy and inform the Master of Ceremonies that Jimmy is now Senior Squire.'

Jimmy grinned as he and Locklear walked away. He seemed about to say something, then thought better of it and followed Locklear.

Martin put his hand on Arutha's shoulder. 'Keep an eye on that boy. He seriously means to be Duke of Krondor someday.'

Arutha said, 'Damn me if he just might not do it.'

Epilogue

Retreat

The moredhel silently raged.

To the three chieftains before him he betrayed no hint of his anger. They were leaders of the most important lowland confederations. As they approached, he knew what they would say before it was spoken. He listened patiently, the light from the large bonfire before his throne casting a flicker across his chest, giving the illusion of movement to the birthmark dragon there.

'Master,' said the centremost chieftain, 'my warriors grow restless. They chafe and they complain. When shall we invade the southlands?'

The Pantathian hissed, but a restraining gesture from the leader quieted him. Murmandamus sat back in his throne and silently brooded on his setback. His finest general lay dead, irretrievable even to those powers at his command. The balking clans of the north were demanding action, while the mountain clans were drifting

away by the day, confounded by Murad's death. Those who had come from the southern forests whispered among themselves of travelling the lesser passes back into the lands of men and dwarves, seeking to return to their homelands in the foothills near the Green Heart and among the highland meadows of the Grey Towers. Only the hill clans and the Black Slayers remained steadfast, and they were too small a force, despite their ferocity. No, the first battle had been lost. The chieftains before him demanded some promise, some sign or portent, to reassure their nervous alliances, before old feuds erupted. Murmandamus knew he could hold the armies here for only a few more weeks without marching. This far north, there were only two short months of warm weather left before the fall, then quickly the harsh northern winter would strike. If war was not forthcoming, to bring booty and plunder, the warriors would soon need to return to their homes. Finally Murmandamus spoke.

'O my children, the auguries are not in fruition.' Pointing above, to stars seen faintly against the glare of the camp's fires, he continued. 'The Cross of Fire heralds only the beginning. But we have not reached the time. Cathos says the fourth Bloodstone is not yet properly aligned. The lowest star will be in proper position at the summer solstice, next year. We cannot hurry the stars.' Inwardly he raged at the dead Murad for having failed him in so critical a mission. "We trusted our fate to one who acted too swiftly, who may have been uncertain in his resolve.' The chieftains exchanged glances. All knew Murad as one above reproach in visiting destruction on the hated humans. As if reading their minds, Murmandamus said, 'For all his might, Murad underestimated the Lord of the West. That is why this human is to be feared, why he must be destroyed. With his death, the way south becomes open, for then shall we visit destruction upon all who oppose our will.'

Standing, he said, "But the time is not yet. We shall wait. Send home your warriors. Let them prepare against winter.' But carry forth the word: let all the tribes and clans gather here next summer, let the confederations march with the sun when it again begins its journey south. For next Midsummer's Day, the Lord of the West shall die.' His voice rose in volume. "We were tested against the powers of our forefathers and found wanting. We were judged guilty of failing in our resolve. We shall not again so fail.' He struck fist to palm, his voice rising to a near-shriek. 'in a year's time we shall bring forth the news that the hated Lord of the West is destroyed. Then shall we march. And we shall not march alone. We shall call our servants, the goblins, the mountain trolls, the land-striding giants. All shall come to serve us. We shall

march into human lands and burn their cities. I shall erect my throne upon a mountain of their bodies. Then, O my children, shall we spill blood.'

Murmandamus gave permission for the chieftains to withdraw. This year's campaign was at an end. Murmandamas signalled to his guards to attend him as he swept past the crooked form of the serpent priest. Silently he brooded upon Murad's death and the loss that death had caused. The Cross of Fire would look much as it did now for the next year and a bit more, so the lie about the configuration would hold. But time was now an enemy.

A winter would be spent in preparation, and remembrance.

No, this defeat would rankle as the freezing nights of winter slowly passed, but those nights would see the birth of another plan, which would bring the death of the Lord of the West, he who was the Bane of Darkness.

And with that death, the onslaught against the nations of men would begin, and the killing would not halt until all lay prostrate at the feet of the moredhel, as was proper.

And the moredhel would serve one master, Murmandamas.

He turned and faced those most loyal to him. In the flickering light of their torches, madness danced in his eyes. His voice was the only sound in the ancient halls, a harsh whisper that grated upon the ear. "How many human slaves have our raiders captured to pull our siege engines?'

One of the captains said, "Several hundred, Master.'

'Kill them all. At once.'

The captain ran to carry out the order, and Murmandamas felt a lessening of the rage within as the prisoners' deaths atoned for Murad's failure. In near-hissing tones, Murmandamus said, "We have erred, O my children. Too soon did we gather to regain that which is rightfully our heritage. In a year, when the snows again have melted from the peaks, we again will gather, and then shall all who oppose us know terror.' He paced about the hall, a figure of stunning power, a fey brilliance surrounding him in an almost perceptible halo. His magnetism was nearly palpable. After a silent time, he spun towards the Pantathian. "

We leave. Prepare the gate.'

The serpent nodded, while the Black Slayers took their positions along the wall. When each was situated in a niche, a field of green energy surrounded them. Each became rigid, a statue in his private nook, awaiting the summons that would come next summer.

The Pantathian finished a long incantation and a shimmering silver field appeared in the air. Without another word, Murmandamus and the Pantathian stepped through the gate, leaving Bar-Sargoth for some place known only to himself and Cathos. The gate winked out of existence. Silence dominated the hall. Then, outside, the screams

of the dying prisoners began to fill the night .

End

The final confrontation between Arutha and Murmandamas, as well as Pug and Tomas's search for Macros the Black, is chronicled in *A Darkness at Sethanon*, published by Grafton.

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A Darkness at Sethanon

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Raymond E. Feist

San Diego, California

### BOOK IV

#### Macros Redux

Lo Death has reared himself a throne  
In a strange city.

Poe, *The City in the sea*, .

Prologue

darkwind

The wind came from nowhere.

Ringling into existence with the reverberation of a hammer striking doom, it carried the heat of a forge that

fashioned hot war and bearing death. It came into being in the heart of a lost land, emerging from some strange place between that which is and that which seeks to be. It blew from the south, when snakes walked upright and spoke ancient words. Angry, it stank of ancient evil, echoing with long forgotten prophecies. In a frenzy the wind spun, swirling out of the void, as if seeking a course, then it seemed to pause, then it blew northward.

The old nurse hummed a simple tune, one handed down from mother to daughter for generations, while she sewed. She paused to glance up from her needlework. Her two small charges lay sleeping, tiny faces serene while they dreamed their tiny dreams. Occasionally fingers would flex or lips would purse in sucking motions, then one or the other would return to quiescence. They were beautiful babies and would grow to be handsome lads, of this the nurse was certain. As men they would have only vague memories of the woman who sat with them this night, but for now they belonged as much to her as their mother, who sat with her husband presiding over a state dinner. Then through the window a strange wind came, chilling her despite its heat. It carried a hint of alien and distorted dissonance in its sound, an evil rune barely perceived. The nurse shivered and looked toward the boys. They became restless, as if ready to wake crying. The nurse hurried to the window and closed the shutters, blocking out the strange and disquieting night air. For a moment it seemed all time held its breath, then, as if with a slight sigh, the breeze died away and the night was calm again. The nurse tightened her shawl about her shoulders and the babies stirred fitfully for another moment, before lapsing into a deep and quiet sleep.

In another room nearby, a young man worked over a list struggling to put aside personal likes and dislikes as he decided who was to serve at a minor function the next day. It was a task he hated, but he did it well. Then the wind made the window curtains blow inward. Without thinking, the youngster was half out of his chair in a crouch, a dirk seeming to fly from his boot top to his hand, as a street-born sense of wariness signalled danger. Poised to fight, he stood with heart pounding for a long moment, as certain of a death struggle as he had ever been in his conflict-torn life. Seeing no one there. the young man slowly relaxed. The moment was lost. He shook his head in perplexity. An odd disquiet settled in the pit of his stomach as he slowly crossed to the window. For long, slowly passing minutes he gazed toward the north, into the night, where he knew the

great mountains lay, and beyond, where an enemy of dark aspect waited. The young man's eyes narrowed as he stared into the gloom, as if seeking to catch a glimpse of some danger lurking out there. Then as the last of the rage and fear fled, he returned to his task. But throughout the balance of the night he occasionally turned to look out the window.

Out in the city a group of revellers made their way through the streets, seeking another inn and more merry companions. The wind blew past them and they halted a moment, exchanging glances. One, a seasoned mercenary, began to walk again, then halted, considering something. With a sudden loss of interest in celebration, he bade his companions good night and returned to the palace where he had guested for almost a year.

The wind blew out to sea where a ship raced toward its home port after a long patrol. The captain, a tall old man with a scarred face and a white eye, paused as he was touched by the freshening wind. He was about to call for the sheets to be shortened when a strange chill passed through him. He looked over to his first mate, a pock-faced man who had been at his side for years. They exchanged glances, then the wind passed. The captain paused, gave the order to send men aloft, and, after another silent moment, shouted for extra lanterns to be lit against the suddenly oppressive gloom.

Farther to the north, the wind blew through the streets of a city, creating angry little dust swirls that danced a mad caper across the cobbles, skittering along like demented jesters. Within this city men from another world lived beside men born there. In the soldiers' commons of the garrison, a man from that other world wrestled one raised within a mile of where the match was taking place, with heavy wagering among those who watched. Each man had taken one fall and the third would decide the winner. The wind suddenly struck and the two opponents paused, looking about. Dust stung eyes and several seasoned veterans suppressed shudders. Without words the two opponents quit the match, and those who had placed wagers picked up their bets without protest. Silently those in the commons returned to their quarters, the festive mood of the conies having fled before the bitter wind.

The wind swept northward until it struck a forest where little apelike beings, gentle and shy, huddled in the branches, seeking a warmth that only close physical contact can provide. Below, on the floor of the forest, a man sat in meditative pose. His legs were crossed and he



rested the backs of his wrists upon his knees, thumbs and forefingers forming circles that represent the Wheel of Life to which all creatures are bound. His eyes snapped open at the first caress of the darkling wind and he regarded the being who sat facing him. An old elf, showing but the faint signs of age native to his race, contemplated the human for a moment, seeing the unspoken question. He nodded his head slightly. The human picked up the two weapons that lay at his side. The long sword and half-sword he placed in his belt sash, and with only a gesture of farewell he was off, moving through the trees of the forest as he began his journey to the sea. There he would seek out another man, one who was also counted friend to the elves, and prepare for the final confrontation that would soon begin. As the warrior made his way toward the ocean the leaves rustled in the branches over his head.

In another forest, leaves also trembled, in sympathy with those troubled by the passing darkwind. Across an enormous gulf of stars, around a greenish yellow sun spun a hot planet. Upon that world, below the cap of ice at the north pole, lay a forest twin to that left behind by the travelling warrior. Deep within that second forest sat a circle of beings steeped in timeless lore. They wove magic. A soft, warm glow of light formed a sphere about them, as each sat upon the bare earth, richly coloured robes unblemished by stain of soil. All eyes were closed, but each saw what he or she needed to see. One, ancient beyond the memory of the others, sat above the circle, suspended in the air by the strength of the spell they all wove together. His white hair hung below his shoulders held back by a simple wire of copper set with a single jade stone upon his forehead. His palms were held up and forward, and his eyes were fixed upon another, a black-robed human, who floated opposite him. That other rode the currents of arcane energy forming a matrix about him, sending his consciousness along those lines, mastering this alien magic. The black-robed one sat in mirror pose, his hands held palm out, but his eyes were closed as he learned. He mentally caressed the fabric of this ancient elver sorcery and felt the intertwined energies of every living thing in this forest, taken and lightly turned, never forced, toward the needs of the community. Thus the Spellweavers used their powers: gently, but persistently, spinning the fibre of these ever present natural energies into a thread of magic that could be used. He touched the magic with his mind and he knew. He knew his powers were growing beyond human understanding, becoming godlike in Comparison to what he had once thought were the limits of his talents. He

had mastered much in the passing year, yet he knew there was much more to learn. Still, with his tutoring he now had the means to find other sources of knowledge. The secrets known to few but the greatest masters - to pass between worlds by strength of will, to move through time, and even to cheat death - he now understood were possible. And with that understanding, he knew he would someday discover the means of mastering those secrets. If he was granted enough time. And time was at a premium. The leaves of the trees echoed the rustle of the distant darkwind. The man in black set dark eyes upon the ancient being floating before him, as both withdrew their minds from the matrix. Speaking by strength of mind, the man in black said, So soon, Acala.? The other smiled, and pale blue eyes shone forth with a light of their own, a light which when first seen had startled the man in black. Now he knew that light came from a deep power beyond any he had known in any mortal save one. But this was a different power, not the astonishing might of that other but the soothing, healing power of life, love, and serenity. This being was truly one with all around him. To gaze into the glowing eyes was to be made whole, and his smile was a comfort to see. But the thoughts that crossed the distance between the two as they gently floated earthward were troubled. It has been a year. It would have served us all had we more time, but time passes as it will, and it may be that you are ready. Then with a texture of thought the black-robed man had come to understand was humour, he added aloud, "But ready or unready, it is time." The others rose as one and for a silent moment the black-clad one felt their minds join with his, in a final farewell. They were sending him back to where a struggle was under way, a struggle in which he was to play a vital part. But they were sending him with much more than he had possessed when he had come to them. He felt the last contact, and said, 'Thank you. I will return to where I can travel quickly home.' Without further words he closed his eyes and vanished. Those in the circle were silent a moment, then each turned to undertake whatever task awaited him or her. In the branches the leaves remained restless and the echo of the darkwind was slow in fading.

The darkwind blew until it reached a ridge trail above a distant vale, where a band of men crouched in hiding. For a brief moment they faced the south, as if seeking the source of this oddly disquieting wind, then they returned to observing the plains below. The two closest to the edge had ridden long and hard in response to a report by an out-riding patrol. Below, an army gathered

under banners of ill-aspect. The leader, a greying man with a black patch over his right eye hunkered down below the ridge. "it's as bad as we feared," he said in hushed tones.

The other man, not as tall but stouter, scratched at a grey-shot black beard as he squatted beside his companion. "No, it's worse," he whispered. "By the number of campfires, there's one hell of a storm brewing down there ."

The man with the eye-patch sat silently for a long moment, then said, "Well, we've somehow gained a year. I expected them to hit us last summer. It is well we prepared, for now they'll surely come." He moved in a crouch as he returned to where a tall, blond man held his horse. "Are you coming?"

The second man said, "No, I think I'll watch for a while. By seeing how many arrive and at what rate, I may hazard a good guess at how many he's bringing."

The first man mounted. The blond man said, "What matter? When he comes, he'll bring all he has."

"I just don't like surprises, I suppose."

"(How long?" asked the leader.

"Two, three days at most, then it will get too crowded hereabouts ."

"They're certain to have patrols out. Two days at the

most." With a grim smile, he said, "You're not much as company goes, but after two years I've grown used to having you around. Be careful."

The second man flashed a broad grin. "That cuts two ways. You've stung them enough for the last two years they'd love to throw a net over you. It wouldn't do to have them show up at the city gates with your head on a battle pike."

The blond man said, "That will not happen." His open smile was in contrast to his tone, one of determination the other two knew well.

"Well, just see it doesn't. Now, get along."

The company moved out, with one rider staying behind to accompany the stout man in his watch. After a long minute of observing he muttered softly, "What are you up to this time, you misbegotten son of a motherless whoremonger? Just what are you going to throw at us this summer, Murmandamus?"

□time, you misbegotten son of a motherless whoremonger? Just what are y

CHAPTER 1

Jimmy raced down the hall.

The last few months had been a time of growth for Jimmy. He would be counted sixteen years old the next

Midsummer's Day, though no one knew his real age Sixteen seemed a likely guess, although he might be closer to seventeen or even eighteen years old. Always athletic, he had begun to broaden in the shoulders and had gained nearly a head of height since coming to court. He now looked more the man than the boy.

But some things never changed, and Jimmy's sense of responsibility remained one of them. While he could be counted upon for important tasks, his disregard of the trivial once again threatened to turn the Prince of Krondor's Court into chaos. Duty prescribed that he, as Senior Squire of the Prince's court, be first at assembly, and as usual, he was likely to be last. Somehow punctuality seemed to elude him. He arrived either late or early, but rarely on time.

Squire Locklear stood at the door to the minor hall used as the squires' assembly point, waving frantically for Jimmy to hurry. Of all the squires, only Locklear had become a friend to the Prince's squire since Jimmy returned with Arutha from the quest for Silverthorn.

Despite Jimmy's first, accurate judgment that Locklear was a child in many ways, the youngest son of the Baron of Land's End had displayed a certain taste for the reckless that had both surprised and pleased his friend.

No matter how chancy a scheme Jimmy plotted, Locklear usually agreed. When delivered up to trouble as a result of Jimmy's gambles with the patience of the court officials, Locklear took his punishment with good grace, counting it the fair price of being caught.

Jimmy sped into the room, sliding across the smooth marble floor as he sought to halt himself. Two dozen green-and-brown-clad squires formed a neat pair of lines in the hall. He looked around, noting everyone was where they were supposed to be. He assumed his own appointed place at the instant that Master of Ceremonies Brian deLacy entered.

When given the rank of Senior Squire, Jimmy had thought it would be all privilege and no responsibility. He had been quickly disabused of that notion. An integral part of the court, albeit a minor one, he was, when he failed his duty, confronted by the single most important fact known to all bureaucrats of any nation or epoch: those above were not interested in excuses, only in results. Jimmy lived and died with every mistake made by the squires. So far, it had not been a good year for Jimmy. With measured steps and rustling red and black robes of office, the tall, dignified Master of Ceremonies crossed to stand behind Jimmy, technically his first assistant after the Steward of the Royal Household, but most often his biggest problem. Flanking Master deLacy were two purple-and-yellow-uniformed court pages, commoners'

sons who would grow up to be servants in the palace, unlike the squires who would some day be among the rulers of the Western Realm. Master deLacy absently tapped his iron-shod staff of office on the floor and said. "Just beat me in again, did you, Squire James?" Keeping a straight face, despite the stifled laughter coming from some of the boys in the back ranks, Jimmy said, 'Everyone is accounted for, Master deLacy. Squire Jerome is in his quarters, excused for injury.' With weary resignation in his voice, deLacy said, 'Yes, I heard of your little disagreement on the playing field yesterday. I think we'll not dwell on your constant difficulties with Jerome. I've had another note from his father. I think in future I'll simply pass these notes to you.' Jimmy tried to look innocent and failed. 'Now, before I go over the day's assignments, I feel it appropriate to point out one fact: you are expected, at all times, to behave as young gentlemen. Toward this cause, I think it also appropriate to discourage a newly emerging trend, namely, wagering upon the outcome of barrel-ball matches played on Sixthday. Do I make myself clear?' The question seemed to be addressed to the assembled squires, but deLacy's hand fell upon Jimmy's shoulder at that moment. 'From this day forward, no more wagering, unless it's something honourable, such as horses, of course. Make no mistake, that is an order.'

All the squires muttered acknowledgement. Jimmy nodded solemnly, secretly relieved he had already placed the bet on that afternoon's match. So much interest among the staff and minor nobility had arisen over this game that Jimmy had been frantically trying to discover a way he could charge admission. There might be a high price to pay should Master deLacy discover Jimmy had already bet on the match, but Jimmy felt honour had been satisfied. DeLacy had said nothing about existing wagers.

Master deLacy quickly went over the schedule prepared the night before by Jimmy. Whatever complaint the Master of Ceremonies might have with his Senior Squire, he had none with the boy's work. Whatever task Jimmy undertook he did well, getting him to undertake the task was usually the problem. When the morning duty was assigned, deLacy said, "At fifteen minutes before the second hour after noon, assemble on the palace steps, for at two hours after noon, Prince Arutha and his court will arrive for the Presentation. As soon as the ceremony is complete you are excused duty for the rest of the day, so those of you with families here will be free to stay with them. However, two of you will be required to stand ready with the Prince's family and

guests. I've selected Squires Locklear and James to serve that duty. You two will go at once to Earl Volney's office and put yourselves at his disposal. That will be all.'

Jimmy stood frozen in chagrined silence for a long moment while deLacy left and the company of Squires broke up. Locklear ambled over to stand before Jimmy and said with a shrug, "Well, aren't we the lucky ones? Everyone else gets to run around and eat, drink, and' - he threw a sidelong glance at Jimmy and grinned - "kiss girls. And we've got to stick close to Their Highnesses.'

'I'll kill him,' said Jimmy, venting his displeasure.

Locklear shook his head. 'Jerome?'

'Who else?' Jimmy motioned for his friend to fall in as he walked away from the hall.

'He told deLacy about the betting. He's paying me back for that black eye I gave him yesterday.'

Locklear sighed in resignation. 'We don't stand a chance of beating Them and Jason and the other apprentices today, with us both not playing.' Locklear and Jimmy were the two best athletes in the company of squires. Nearly as quick as Jimmy, Locklear was second only to him among the squires in swordsmanship.

Together they were the two best ball handlers in the palace, and with both out of the match, it was a near certain victory for the apprentices. 'How much did you bet?'

"All of it,' answered Jimmy. Locklear winced. The

squires had been pooling their silver and gold for months in anticipation of this match. "Well, how was I to know deLacy would pull this business? Besides, with all those losses we've had, I got five-to-two odds in favour of the apprentices.' He had spent months developing a losing trend in the squires' game, setting up this big wager. He considered. 'We may not be out of it yet. I'll think of something.'

Changing the subject, Locklear said, "You just cut it a little fine today. What held you up this time?'

Jimmy grinned, his features losing their dark aspect. 'I was talking to Marianna.' Then his features returned to an expression of disgust. "She was going to meet me after the game, but now we'll be with the Prince and Princess.'

Accompanying his growth since last summer, another change in Jimmy had been his discovery of girls.

Suddenly their company and good opinion of him were vital. Given his upbringing and knowledge, especially compared to those of the other squires in court, Jimmy was worldly beyond his years. The former thief had been making his presence known among the younger serving girls of the palace for several months. Marianna was

simply the most recent to catch his fancy and be swept off her feet by the clever, witty and handsome young squire. Jimmy's curly brown hair, ready grin, and flashing dark eyes had caused him to become an object of concern for more than one girl's parents among the palace staff.

Locklear attempted to look uninterested, a pose that was quickly eroding as he himself became more often the focus of the palace girls' attention. He was getting taller by the week, it seemed, almost as tall as Jimmy 'now. His wavy, blond-streaked brown hair and cornflower-blue eyes framed by almost feminine lashes, his handsome smile, and his friendly, easy manner had all made him popular with the younger girls of the palace. He hadn't grown quite comfortable with the idea of girls yet, as at home he had only brothers, but being around Jimmy had already convinced him there was more to girls than he had thought back at Land's End. 'Well,' Locklear said, picking up the pace of their walking, "if deLacy doesn't find a reason to chuck you out of service, or Jerome doesn't have you beaten by town roughs, some jealous kitchen boy or angry father's likely to comb your hair with a cleaver. But none of them will have a prayer if we're late to the chancery - because Earl Volney will have our heads on pikes. Come on.'

With a laugh and an elbow to the ribs, Locklear was off, with Jimmy a step behind as they ran down the halls. One old servant looked up from his dusting to watch the boys racing along and for a moment reflected on the magic of youth. Then, resigned to the effects of time's passage, he returned to the duties at hand.

The crowd cheered as the heralds began their march down the steps of the palace. They cheered, in part because they would now be addressed by their Prince who, while somewhat aloof, was well respected and counted evenhanded with justice. They cheered, in part because they would see the Princess whom they loved. She was a symbol of continuation of an old line, a link from the past to the future. But most of all they cheered because they were among the lucky citizens not of the nobility who would be allowed to eat from the Prince's larder and to drink from his wine cellar.

The Festival of Presentation was conducted thirty days following the birth of any member of the royal family. How it began remained a mystery, but it was commonly held that the ancient rulers of the city-state of Rillanon were required to show the people, of every rank and station, that the heirs to the throne were born without flaw. Now it was a welcome holiday to the people, for it was as if an extra Midsummer's festival had been

granted.

Those guilty of misdemeanours were pardoned, matters of honour were considered resolved and duelling was forbidden for a week and a day following the Presentation, all debts owing since the last Presentation Princess Anita's nineteen years ago - were forgiven, and for the afternoon and evening, rank was put aside as commoner and noble ate from the same table.

As Jimmy took his place behind the heralds, he realized that "someone always had to work. Someone had to prepare all the food being served today, and someone had to clean up tonight. And he had to stand ready to serve Arutha and Anita should they require it. Sighing to himself, he considered again the responsibilities that seemed to find him no matter where he hid.

Locklear hummed softly to himself while the heralds continued to take up position, followed by members of Arutha's Household Guard. The arrival of Cardan, Knight-Marshal of Krondor, and Earl Volney, acting Principate Chancellor, indicated the ceremonies were about to begin.

The grey-haired soldier, his black face set in an amused expression, nodded to the portly Chancellor, then signalled to Master deLacy to begin. The Master of Ceremonies' staff struck the ground and the trumpeters and drummers sounded ruffles and flourishes. The crowd hushed as the Master of Ceremonies struck the ground again, and a herald cried, 'Hearken to me! Hearken to me. his Highness, Arutha Condoin, Prince of Krondor, Lord of the Western Realm, Heir to the throne of Rillanon.' The crowd cheered, though it was 'more for form than out of any genuine enthusiasm. Arutha was the sort of man who inspired deep respect and admiration, not affection, in the populace.

A tall, rangy, dark-haired man entered, dressed in muted brown clothing of fine weave, his shoulders covered with the red mantle of his office. He paused, his brown eyes narrow, while the herald announced the Princess. When the slender, red-headed Princess of Krondor joined her husband, the merry glint in her green eyes caused him to smile, and the crowd began to cheer in earnest. Here was their beloved Anita, daughter of Arutha's predecessor, Erland.

While the actual ceremony would be quickly over, the introduction of nobles took a great deal longer. A cadre of palace nobles and guests was entitled to public presentation. The first pair of these was announced. "Their Graces, the Duke and Duchess of Salador.'

A handsome, blond man offered his arm to a darkhaired woman. Laurie, former minstrel and traveller,



now Duke of Salador and husband to Princess Carline, escorted his beautiful wife to her brother's side. They had arrived in Krondor a week before, to see their nephews, and would stay another week.

On and on droned the herald as other members of the

nobility were introduced and, finally, visiting dignitaries, including the Keshian Ambassador. Lord Hazara-Khan entered with only four bodyguards, forgoing the usual Keshian pomp.

The Ambassador was dressed in the style of the desert men of the Jal-Pur: a long robe of indigo over white cloth head cover that left only the eyes exposed, tunic and trousers tucked into calf-high black boots. The bodyguards were garbed from head to toe in black.

Then deLacy stepped forward and called, 'Let the populace approach.' Several hundred men and women of varying rank, from the poorest beggar to the richest commoner, gathered below the steps of the palace.

Arutha spoke the ritual words of the Presentation.

"Today is the three hundred tenth day of the second year of the reign of our Lord King, Lyam the First. Today we present our sons.'

DeLacy struck his staff upon the ground and the herald called out, "Their Royal Highnesses, the Princes Borric and Erland.' The crowd erupted in a nearfrenzy of shouts and cheers as the twin sons of Arutha and Anita, born a month before, were publicly presented for the first time. The nurse selected to care for the boys came forward and gave her charges over to their mother and father. Arutha took Borric, named for his father, while Anita took her own father's namesake. Both babies endured the public showing with good grace though Erland showed signs of becoming fussy. The crowd continued to cheer, even after Arutha and Anita had returned their sons to the care of the nurse. Arutha Faced those gathered below the steps with another rare smile. 'My sons are well and strong, they are born without flaw. They are fit to rule. Do you accept them as sons of the royal house?' The crowd shouted its approbation. Anita reflected her husband's smile. Arutha waved to the crowd. "our thanks, good people. Until the feasting, I bid you all good day.'

The ceremony was over. Jimmy hurried to Arutha's side, as was his duty, while Locklear moved to Anita's side. Locklear was formally a junior squire, but he was so often given duty with the Princess that he was commonly considered her personal squire. Jimmy suspected deLacy of wanting to keep himself and Locklear together so watching them would be that much easier. The Prince threw Jimmy a distracted half-smile as he

watched his wife and sister fuss over the twins. The Keshian Ambassador had removed his traditional face covering and was smiling at the sight. His four bodyguards hovered close.

'Your Highnesses,' said the Keshian, 'are thrice blessed. Healthy babies are a gift of the gods. And they are sons. And two of them.'

Arutha basked in the glow of his wife, who looked radiant as she regarded her sons in the nurse's arms. 'I thank you, my Lord Hazara-Khan. It is an unexpected benefit having you with us this year.'

The weather in Durbin is beastly this year,' he said absently as he began to make faces at little Borric. He suddenly remembered his station and more formally said, 'Besides, your Highness, we have a minor matter to finish discussing regarding the new border here in the West.'

Arutha laughed. 'With you, my dear Abdur, minor details become major concerns. I have little love for the prospect of facing you across the negotiating table again. Still, I'll pass along any suggestions you make to His Majesty.' The Keshian bowed and said, 'I wait upon Your

Highness's pleasure.'

Arutha seemed to notice the guards. 'I don't see your sons or Lord Daoud-Khan in attendance.'

"They conduct the business I would normally oversee among my people in the Jal-Pur.'

"These?" said Arutha, indicating the four bodyguards. Each was dressed entirely in jet, even to the scabbards of their scimitars, and while their costuming was similar to that of the desert men, it was different from anything Arutha had seen of Keshians.

'These are izmalis, Highness. They serve as personal protection, nothing more.'

Arutha chose to say nothing as the knot of people around the babies seemed about to break up. The izmalis were famous as bodyguards, the finest protection available to the nobility of the Empire of Great Kesh, but rumour had it they were also highly trained spies and, occasionally, assassins. Their abilities were nearly legendary. They were reputed to be everything just short of ghosts in their ability to come and go undetected. Arutha disliked having men only one step away from assassins within his walls, but Abdur was entitled to his personal retinue, and Arutha judged it unlikely the Keshian Ambassador would bring anyone into Krondor who might be dangerous to the Kingdom. Besides himself, Arutha added silently.

"We shall also need to speak of the latest request from

Greg regarding docking rights in Kingdom ports,' said Lord Hazara-Khan.

Arutha looked openly amazed. Then his expression changed to one of irritation. 'I suppose a passing fisherman or sailor just mentioned it to you as you disembarked at the harbour?'

"Highness, Kesh has friends in many places,' answered the Ambassador with an ingratiating smile.

.Well, it will certainly do no good to comment on Kesh's Imperial Intelligence Corps, for we both know that' - Hazara-Khan joined in and they both spoke in unison - 'no such group exists.'

Abdur Rachman Memo Hazara-Khan bowed and said, "With Your Highness's kind permission?'

Arutha bowed slightly as the Keshian made his farewell, then turned to Jimmy. 'What? You two scoundrels drew duty today?'

Jimmy shrugged, indicating it wasn't his idea. Arutha noticed his wife instructing the nurse to return the twins to their nursery. "Well, you must have done something to warrant deLacy's displeasure. Still, we can't have you missing all the fun. I understand there's supposed to be a particularly good barrel-ball game later this afternoon.'

Jimmy feigned surprise, while Locklear's face lit up. 'I think so,' said Jimmy noncommittally.

Motioning the boys to follow as the Prince's party began to head inside, Arutha said, 'Well then, we'll have to drop in and see how it goes, won't we?'

Jimmy winked at Locklear. Then Arutha said, 'Besides, if you boys lose that bet, your skins won't be worth a tanner's trouble by the time the other squires get through with you.'

Jimmy said nothing while they moved toward the great hall and the reception for the nobles before the commoners were admitted to the feast in the courtyard. Then he whispered to Locklear, 'That man has an irritating habit of always knowing what's going on around here.'

The celebration was in full swing, nobles mingling with those commoners granted admission to the palace courtyard. Long tables stood heavily laden with food and drink, and for many in attendance this was the finest meal they would eat this year. While formality was forgotten, the commoners were still deferential to Arutha and his party, bowing slightly and using formal address. Jimmy and Locklear hovered nearby, in case they were needed. Carline and Laurie walked arm in arm behind Arutha

and Anita. Since their own wedding, the new Duke and Duchess of Salador had settled down somewhat, in

contrast to their well-reported and stormy romance at the King's court. Anita turned toward her sister-in-law and said, "I'm pleased you could stay this long. It's so much a man's palace here in Krondor. And now with two boys. . . 'it's going to get worse,' finished Carline. 'Being raised

by a father and two brothers, I know what you mean.'

Arutha glanced over his shoulder at Laurie and said "It means she was spoiled shamelessly.'

Laurie laughed, but thought better of comment as his wife's blue eyes narrowed. Anita said, "Next time, a daughter.'

'Then she can be shamelessly spoiled,' said Laurie.

'When are you going to have children?' asked Anita.

Arutha turned from the table with a pitcher of ale, filling both his own and Laurie's mugs. A servant hastened to present wine cups to the ladies. Carline answered Anita by saying, 'We'll have them when we have them. Believe me, it isn't for lack of trying.'

Anita stifled a laugh behind her hand, while Arutha and Laurie exchanged glances. Carline looked from face to face and said, 'Don't tell me you two are blushing?'

To Anita she said, 'Men.'

'Lyam's last missive said Queen Magda might be with child. I expect we'll know for certain when he sends his next bundle of dispatches.'

Carline said, "Poor Lyam, always such a one for the ladies, having to marry for reasons of state. Still, she's a decent sort, if a little dull, and he seems happy enough.'

Arutha said, "The Queen isn't dull. Compared to you a fleet of Quegan raiders is dull.' Laurie said nothing, but his blue eyes echoed Arutha's comment. "I just hope they have a son. '

Anita smiled. "Arutha's anxious for another to become 'Prince of Krondor.'

Carline looked at her brother knowingly. 'Still, you'll not be done with matters of state. With Caldric dead, Lyam will rely more upon you and Martin than before.'

Lord Caldric of Rillanon had died shortly after the King's marriage to Princess Magda of Roldem, leaving the office of Duke of Rillanon, Royal Chancellor - First Adviser to the King - vacant.

Arutha shrugged as he sampled food from his plate. "I think he'll find no end of applicants for Caldric's office.'

Laurie said, 'That's exactly the problem. Too many nobles are seeking advantage over their neighbours. We've had three sizeable border skirmishes between barons in the East - not anything to have Lyam send out his own army, but enough to make everyone east of Malac's Cross nervous. That's why Bas-Tira is still without a duke. it's too powerful a duchy for Lyam to

hand over to just anyone. If you're not careful, you'll find yourself named Duke of Krondor or Bas-Tyra should Magda give birth to a boy.'

Carline said, 'Enough This is a holiday. I'll have no more politics tonight.'

Anita took Arutha's arm. 'Come along. We've had a good meal, there's a festival underway, and the babies are blessedly asleep. Besides,' she added with a laugh, 'tomorrow we have to start worrying over how we pay for this festival and the Festival of Banapis next month. Tonight we enjoy what we have.'

Jimmy managed to insinuate himself next to the Prince and said, 'Would your Highness be interested in viewing a contest?' Locklear and he exchanged worried glances, for the time for the game to begin was past.

Anita threw her husband a questioning glance. Arutha said, 'I promised Jimmy we'd go and see the barrel-ball match he's conspired to have played today.'

Laurie said, 'That might be more entertaining than another round of jugglers and actors.'

'That's only because most of your life has been spent around jugglers and actors,' said Carline. 'When I was a girl, it was considered the thing to sit and watch the boys beat each other to death in a barrel-ball game every Sixthday, while pretending not to watch. I'll take the actors and jugglers.'

Anita said, 'Why don't you two go along with the boys? We're all informal today. We'll join you later in the great hall for the evening entertainment.'

Laurie and Arutha agreed and followed the boys through the throng. They left the central courtyard of the palace and passed along a series of halls connecting the central palace complex with outer buildings. Behind the palace stood a large marshalling yard, near the stables, where the palace guards drilled. A large crowd had gathered and was cheering lustily when Arutha, Laurie, Jimmy and Locklear arrived. They worked their way toward the front, jostling spectators. A few turned to complain to those shoving past but, seeing the Prince, said nothing.

A place was made for them behind those squires not playing. Arutha waved to Cardan, who stood on the other side of the field with a squad of off-duty soldiers. Laurie watched the play a moment and said, 'This is a lot more organized than I remember.'

Arutha said, 'It's deLacy's doing. He wrote up rules for the game, after complaining to me about the number of boys too beat up to work after a match.' He pointed. 'See that fellow with the sandglass? He times the contest. The game lasts an hour now. Only a dozen boys to a side at a time, and they must play between those chalk lines

on the ground. Jimmy, what are the other rules?'

Jimmy was stripping off his belt and dagger in preparation. He said, "No hands, like always. When one side scores, it falls back past the midpoint line and the other side gets to bring the ball up. No biting, grabbing an opponent, or weapons allowed.'

Laurie said, "No weapons? Sounds too tame for me.'

Locklear had already rid himself of his overtunic and belt and tapped another squire on the shoulder. 'What's the score?'

The squire never took his eyes from play. A stableboy, driving the ball before him with his feet, was tripped by one of Jimmy's teammates, but the ball was intercepted by a baker's apprentice, who deftly kicked it into one of the two barrels situated at each end of the compound.

The squire groaned. 'That puts them ahead four counts to two. And we've less than a quarter hour to play.'

Jimmy and Locklear both looked to Arutha, who nodded. They dashed onto the field, replacing two dirty, bloody squires.

Jimmy took the ball from one of the two judges, another of deLacy's innovations, and kicked the ball toward the mid-line. Locklear, who had stationed himself there, quickly kicked it back to Jimmy, to the surprise of the several apprentices who bore down upon him.

Lightning-fast, Jimmy passed them before they could recover, ducking an elbow aimed at his head. He loosed a kick at the barrel's mouth. The ball struck the edge and bounced out, but Locklear broke free of the pack and kicked the rebound in. The squires and a large number of minor nobles were on their feet cheering. Now the apprentices led by only one count.

A minor scuffle broke out and the judges quickly intervened. With no serious damage having been done, play resumed. The apprentices brought the ball up, Locklear and Jimmy fell back. One of the larger squires threw a vicious block, knocking a kitchen boy into the one with the ball. Jimmy pounced like a cat, kicking the ball toward Locklear. The smaller squire deftly moved it upfield, passing it on to another squire who immediately kicked it back as several apprentices swarmed over him.

A large stableboy rushed Locklear. He simply lowered his head and took Locklear, himself, and the ball across the field boundary rather than trying to tackle the ball .

At once a fight broke out and, after the judges had separated the combatants, they helped Locklear to his feet. The boy was too shaken to continue, so another squire took his place. As both players had been beyond bounds, the judge ruled the ball free and tossed it into the centre of the field. Both sides attempted to recover the ball as elbows, knees and fists flew.

"Now this is how barrel-ball should be played," commented Laurie.

Suddenly a stableboy broke free, no one between himself and the squires' barrel. Jimmy took off after him and seeing no hope of intercepting the ball, launched himself at the boy, repeating the technique used against Locklear. Again the judge ruled the ball free and another riot ensued at midfield.

Then a squire named Paul had the ball and began to move it toward the apprentices' goal with unexpected skill. Two large baker's apprentices intercepted him, but he managed to pass the ball seconds before being levelled. The ball bounced to Squire Friedric, who passed it to Jimmy. Jimmy expected another rush from the apprentices, but was surprised as they fell back. This was a new tactic, employed against the lightning passing Jimmy and Locklear had brought to the game.

The squires on the sidelines shouted encouragement. One yelled, 'There's only a few minutes left.'

Jimmy motioned Squire Friedric to his side, shouted quick instructions, and then was off. Jimmy swept to the left and then dropped the ball back to Friedric, who moved back toward midfield. Jimmy cut to his right, then took a well-aimed pass from Friedric toward the barrel. He dodged a sliding tackle and kicked the ball into the barrel.

The crowd shouted in appreciation, for this match was bringing something new to barrel-ball: tactics and skill. In what was always a rough game, an element of precision was being introduced.

Then another fight broke out. The judges rushed to break it up, but the apprentices were unbending in their reluctance to end the scuffle. Locklear, whose head had stopped ringing, said to Laurie and Arutha, 'They're trying to hold up the game until time runs out. They know we'll win if we get another crack at the ball.' Finally order was restored. Locklear judged himself fit enough to return and replaced a boy injured in the scuffle. Jimmy waved his squires back, quickly whispering instructions to Locklear as the apprentices slowly brought the ball . up. They attempted the passing demonstrated by Jimmy, Friedric, and Locklear, but with little skill. They nearly kicked the ball out of bounds twice before regaining control of errant passes. Then Jimmy and Locklear struck.

Locklear feigned a tackle toward the ball handler, forcing him to pass, then darted toward the ball hand toward the barrel. Jimmy camee sweeping in behind, the

others acting as a screen, and picked up the badly passed ball, kicking it toward Locklear. The smaller boy took

the ball and broke toward the barrel. One defender attempted to overtake him, but couldn't catch the swifter squire. Then the apprentice took something from his shirt and threw it at Locklear.

To the surprised onlookers, it seemed the boy simply fell face down and the ball went out of bounds. Jimmy rushed to the side of his comrade, then suddenly was up and after the boy who was attempting to bring the ball onto the field. With no pretence of playing a game, Jimmy struck the apprentice in the face, knocking him back. Again a fight erupted, but this time several apprentices and squires from the two sides joined the fray. Arutha turned to Laurie and said, "This could get ugly.

Think I should do something?' Laurie watched the fight pick up in tempo. "if you

want a squire left intact for duty tomorrow.'

Arutha signalled to Cardan, who waved some soldiers onto the field. The seasoned fighting men quickly restored order. Arutha walked across the field and knelt next to where Jimmy sat, cradling Locklear's head in his lap. 'The bastard hit him in the back of the head with a piece of horseshoe iron. He's out cold.'

Arutha regarded the fallen boy, then said to Cardan, "Have him carried to his quarters and have the surgeon examine him.' He said to the timekeeper, 'This game is over.' Jimmy seemed on the verge of protesting, then seemed to think better of it.

The timekeeper called out, "The score is tied at four counts apiece. No winners.'

Jimmy sighed. 'Nor losers, at least.'

A pair of guards picked up Locklear and carried him away. Arutha said to Laurie, 'Still a pretty rough game.' The former singer nodded. 'DeLacy needs a few more rules before they start cracking heads.'

Jimmy walked back to where his tunic and belt lay while the crowd wandered off. Arutha and Laurie followed. 'We'll have another go, sometime,' remarked the youngster.

'it could be interesting,' said Arutha. 'Now that they know about that passing trick of yours, they'll be ready.'

"So we'll just have to come up with something else.'

'Well, then I guess it might be worthwhile to make a day of it. Say in a week or two.' Arutha placed his hand on Jimmy's shoulder. 'I think I'll have a look at these rules of deLacy's. Laurie's right. If you're going to be dashing pell-mell up and down the field, we can't have you tossing irons at each other.'

Jimmy seemed to lose interest in the game. Something in the crowd caught his eye. 'See that fellow over there? The one in the blue tunic and grey cap?'



The Prince glanced in the indicated direction. 'No.'  
"He just ducked away when you looked. But I know

him. May I go and investigate?'

Something in Jimmy's tone made Arutha certain this was not another ploy to escape duty. 'Go on. Just don't be away too long. Laurie and I will be returning to the great hall.'

Jimmy ran off to where he last saw the fellow. He halted and looked about, then noticed the familiar figure standing near a narrow stairway into a side entrance. The man leaned against the wall, hidden in shadows, eating from a platter. He only glanced up when Jimmy approached. 'There you are, then, Jimmy the Hand.'  
'No longer. Squire James of Krondor, Alvarny the Quick.'

The old thief chuckled. "And that also no longer. Though I was quick in my day.' Lowering his voice so anyone else was unlikely to overhear, he said, "My master sends a message for your master.' Jimmy knew at

once something major was afoot, for Alvarny the Quick was the Daymaster of the Mockers, the Guild of Thieves. ~he was no common errand runner but one' of the most highly placed and trusted aides of the Upright Man. 'By word only. My master says that birds of prey, thought gone from the city, have returned from the north.'

A chill visited the pit of Jimmy's stomach. "Those that hunt at night?' The old thief nodded as he popped a lightly browned pastry into his mouth. He closed his eyes a moment and made a satisfied sound. Then his eyes were on Jimmy, narrowing as he spoke. "Sorry I was to see you leave us, Jimmy the Hand. You had promise. You could have been a power in the Mockers if you'd kept your throat uncut. But that's water gone, as they say. To the heart of the message. Young Tyburn Rooms was found floating in the bay. There are places near where smugglers used to ply their trade, one is a place that smells and is of little importance to the Mockers and, therefore, is neglected. It may be that is where such birds are hiding. Now then, there's an end to the matter.' Without further conversation, Alvarny the Quick, Daymaster of the Mockers and former master thief, sauntered off into the crowd, vanishing among the revellers.

Jimmy did not hesitate. He dashed back to where Arutha had been only a few minutes before and, not finding him, headed for the great hall. The number of people before the palace made it difficult to move quickly. Seeing hundreds of strange faces in the corridors suddenly filled Jimmy with alarm. In the months since Arutha and he had returned from Moraelin with

Silverthorn to cure the stricken Anita, they had become lulled by the commonplace, everyday quality of palace life. Suddenly the boy saw an assassin's dagger in every hand, poison in every wine cup, and a bowman in every shadow. Struggling past celebrants, he hurried on. Jimmy darted through the press of nobles and other less distinguished guests in the great hall. Near the dais a clot of people were deep in conversation. Laurie and Carline were speaking with the Keshian Ambassador, while Arutha mounted the steps toward his throne. A band of acrobats was hard at work in the centre of the hall forcing Jimmy to skirt the clearing made for them, while dozens of citizens looked on in appreciation. As he moved through the press, Jimmy glanced up at the windows of the hall, the deep shadows within each cupola haunting him with memories. He felt anger at himself as much as anyone. He above all others should remember what a menace could lurk in such places. Jimmy darted past Laurie and reached Arutha's side as the Prince sat on his throne. Anita was nowhere in sight. Jimmy glanced at her empty throne and inclined his head. Arutha said, "She's gone to look in on the babies, Why?"

Jimmy leaned near Arutha. 'My former master sends a message. Nighthawks have returned to Krondor.' Arutha's expression turned sombre. 'Is this speculation, or a certainty?'

'First, the Upright Man would not send whom he sent unless he counted the matter critical, needing quick resolution. He exposed one high in the Mockers to public scrutiny. Second, there is - was - a young gambler by name Tyburn Rooms who was often seen about in the city. He had some special dispensations from the Mockers. He was permitted things few men not of our guild are permitted. Now I know why. He was a personal .cut of my former master. Rooms is now dead. My guess is the Upright Man was alerted to the possibility of the Nighthawks' return and Rooms was sent to discover their whereabouts. They are once again hidden somewhere in the city. Where, the Upright Man does not know, but he suspects somewhere near the old smugglers' warren.' Jimmy had been speaking to the Prince while glancing about the hall. Now he turned to look at Arutha and words failed him. Arutha's face was a hard mask of controlled anger, almost to the point of a grimace. Several nearby had turned to stare at him. In a harsh whisper he said to Jimmy, "So it's to begin again?" Jimmy said, 'So it would seem.'

Arutha stood. "I'll not become a prisoner in my own palace, with guards at every window.'

Jimmy's eyes roamed the hall, past where the Duchess

Carline stood charming the Keshian Ambassador. "Well and good, but this one day your house is overrun with strangers. Common sense dictates you retire to your suite early, for if ever there was a golden chance to get close to you, it is now.' His eyes kept passing from face to face, seeking some sign that something was amiss. "if the Nighthawks are again in Krondor, then they are in this hall or en route as night approaches. You may find them waiting between here and your own quarters.'

Suddenly Arutha's eyes widened. "My quarters! Anita and the babies!'

The Prince 'was off, ignoring the startled faces about him, Jimmy at his heels. Carline and Laurie saw something was wrong and followed.

Within moments a dozen people trailed behind the Prince as he hurried down the corridor. Cardan had seen the hasty exit and had fallen in beside Jimmy. 'What is it?' Jimmy said, "Nighthawks.'

The Knight-Marshal of Krondor needed no further warning. He grabbed at the sleeve of the first guard he met in the hall, motioning for another to follow. To the first he said, 'Send for Captain Valdis and have him join me.

The soldier said, "Where will you be, sir?'

Cardan sent the man off with a shove. 'Tell him to find US.'

As they hurried along, Cardan gathered nearly a dozen soldiers to him. When Arutha reached the door to his quarters, he hesitated a moment, as if fearful to open the door.

Pushing open the door, he discovered Anita sitting next to the cribs wherein their sons slept. She looked up and at once an expression of alarm crossed her features.

Coming to her husband, she said, 'What is it?'

Arutha closed the door behind him, motioning for Carline and the others to wait without. "Nothing, yet.'

He paused a moment. 'I want you to take the babies and visit your mother. '

Anita said, "She would welcome that,' but her tone left no doubt she understood there was more here than she was being told. 'Her illness is past, though she still doesn't feel up to travel. It will be a treat for her.' Then she fixed Arutha with a questioning look. 'And we shall be more easily protected in her small estate than here.'

Arutha knew better than to attempt to hide anything from Anita. "Yes. We again have Nighthawks to worry about.'

Anita came to her husband and rested her head against his chest. The last assassination attempt had nearly cost her life. 'I have no fear for myself, but the babies. . . '

'You leave tomorrow.'

'I'll make ready.'

Arutha kissed her and moved toward the door. "I'll return shortly. Jimmy advises I keep in quarters 'until the

palace is free of strangers. Good advice, but I must remain on public view a while longer. The Nighthawks think us ignorant of their return. We cannot let them think otherwise, yet.'

Finding humour amid 'the terror, Anita said, 'Jimmy still seeks to be First Adviser to the Prince?'

Arutha smiled at that. "He's not spoken of being named Duke of Krondor for nearly a year. Sometimes I think he'd be better suited than many others likely to come to that office.'

Arutha opened the door and found Cardan, Jimmy, Laurie, and Carline waiting. Others had been moved away by a company of the Royal Household Guard. Next to Cardan, Captain Valdis waited. Arutha told him, "I want a full company of lancers ready to ride in the morning, Captain. The Princess and the Princes will be travelling to the Princess Mother's estates. Guard them well.' Captain Valdis saluted and turned to issue orders. To Cardan, Arutha said, 'Begin to slowly place men back at post throughout the palace and have every possible hiding place searched. Should any inquire, say Her Highness is feeling poorly and I am staying with her for a while. I'll return to the great hall shortly.' Cardan nodded and left. Then Arutha added to Jimmy, "I have an errand for you.' Jimmy said, "I'll leave at once.'

Arutha said, "What do you think you're going to do?

"Go to the docks,' said the boy with a grim smile.

Arutha nodded, again' both pleased and surprised at the boy's grasp of things. 'Yes. If you must, search all night. But as soon as you can, find Trevor Hull and bring him here.'

2

## Discovery

Jimmy searched the room.

The Fiddler Crab Inn was a haunt of many who wished a safe harbour from questions and prying eyes. As the sun began to set the room was crowded with locals, so Jimmy was at once the source of curiosity, for his clothing marked him out of place. A few native to the city knew him by sight - after the Poor Quarter, the docks had been a second home to him - but no small number of those in the inn marked him as a rich boy out on the evening, perhaps one with some gold to be shaken loose.

One such man, a sailor by the look of him, drunken and belligerent, barred Jimmy's passage through the room. 'Here and now, such a fine young gentleman as

yourself'll be having a spare coin or two to buy a drink in celebration of the little Princes, wouldn't you think?' He rested his hand upon his belt dagger.

Jimmy adroitly sidestepped the man and was half past him; saying, 'No, I wouldn't.' The man reached for Jimmy's shoulder and tried to halt him. Jimmy came around in a fluid movement, and the man found the point of a dirk levelled at his throat. 'I said I don't have any extra gold.'

The man backed away, and several onlookers laughed. But others began to circle the squire. Jimmy knew at once he had made an error. He'd had no time to scrounge up clothing to fit his present environment, but he could have made a show of turning over a half-empty purse to the man. Still, once begun, such a confrontation could not be aborted. A moment before, Jimmy's purse had been at risk, now it was his life.

Jimmy backed up, seeking to place his back to a wall. His expression was hard and revealed no hint of fear, and a few who surrounded him suddenly understood that here was someone who knew his way about the docks. Softly he said, 'I'm looking for Trevor Hull.'

At once the men stopped advancing upon the boy. One turned and indicated with his head a back door. Jimmy hurried toward it and pulled aside the hanging cloth cover. A group of men sat gambling in a large, smoke-filled room. From the pile of betting markers on the table, it was for high stakes. The game was tin-tan, common to the southern Kingdom and northern Kesh. A colourful display of cards was unfolded and players bet and dealt in turn, determining odds and payoffs by which cards were turned. Among the gamblers were two men, one with a scar from forehead to chin, running through a milk-white right eye, and the other a bald, pock-faced man. Aaron Cook, the bald man and first mate on the

customs cutter Royal Raven, looked up as Jimmy pushed toward the table. He nudged the other man, who sat regarding his cards with disgust, throwing them down. When he saw the youth, the man with the white eye smiled then, as he took note of Jimmy's expression, the smile faded. Jimmy spoke loudly, over the noise in the room. 'Your old friend Arthur wants you.' Trevor Hull, onetime pirate and smuggler, knew at

once who Jimmy meant. Arthur was the name Arutha had used when Hull's smugglers and the Mockers had joined forces to get Arutha and Anita out of Kronador while Guy du Bas-Tyra's secret police had been combing the city for them. After the Riftwar, Arutha had

pardoned Hull and his crew for past crimes and had enlisted them in the Royal Customs Service.

Hull and Cook stood as one and left the table. One of the other gamblers, a heavyset merchant of some means by his dress, spoke around a pipe. 'Where are you off to? The hand's not played out.'

Hull, his shock of grey hair fanning out around his head like a nimbus, shouted, 'it is for me. Hell, I only have a run in blue and a pair of four counts to play,' and he reached back and turned over all his cards.

Jimmy winced as men around the table began to curse and throw in their cards. In the common room, as they headed for the door, Jimmy observed, "You're a mean man, Hull.'

The old smuggler turned customs officer laughed an evil laugh. "That fat fool was ahead, and on my gold. I just wanted to take some wind out of his sails.' The nature of the game was such that as soon as he revealed his hand, play was disrupted. The only fair thing would be to leave the bets out and redeal the entire hand, a prospect not appreciated by those with good cards left to play.

Outside of the inn, they hurried along the streets, past celebrants as the festival began to pick up while afternoon shadows lengthened.

Arutha stood looking down at the maps on the table.

The maps were from his archives, provided by the royal architect, and showed the streets of Krondor in detail. Another, showing the sewers, had been used before in the last raid against the Nighthawks. For the past ten minutes Trevor Hull had been carefully studying them all. Hull had headed the most prosperous gang of smugglers in Krondor before taking service with Arutha, and the sewers and back alleys had been his means of bringing contraband into the city.

Hull conferred with Cook, then the older man rubbed his chin. His finger pointed at a spot on the map where a dozen tunnels came together in a near-maze. 'if the Nighthawks were living down in the sewers, the Upright Man would have spotted them before they could have dug in. But it may be they're using the tunnels as a way in and out' - his finger moved to another spot on the map - 'here.' His finger lingered over a portion of the docks resembling a crescent

along the bay. Halfway

along the curve the docks ended and the warehouse district began, but also nestled against the water was a small section of the Poor Quarter, like a pie-shaped

wedge driven between the more prosperous trading areas.

"Fish Town," said Jimmy.

"Fish Town," echoed Arutha.

"It's the poorest section of the Poor Quarter," said Cook.

Hull nodded. (It's called Fish Town, Divers' Town, Dockside, and other things as well. Used to be a fishing village a long time ago. As the city grew northward along the bay, it was surrounded by businesses, but there're still some fisher families living there. Mostly lobstermen and mussel rakers who work the bay, or clam diggers who work the beaches north of the city. But it's also located near the tanners, dyers, and other foul-smelling sections of Krondor, so no one who can afford better lives there.) Jimmy said, "Alvarny said the Upright Man thought

they were hiding in a place that smells. So he thinks of Fish Town as well. Jimmy shook his head as he considered the map. 'If the Nighthawks are hiding in Fish Town, finding them will be difficult. Even the Mockers don't control Fish Town as firmly as they do the rest of the Poor Quarter and the docks. There's a lot of places to get lost in there.' Hull agreed. 'We used to run in and out near there,

through a tunnel to a landing once used to carry cargo into the harbour from some merchant's basement.' Arutha studied the map and nodded: he knew where that landing lay. 'We used a number of different locations, moving things in and out, varying where we kept them from time to time.' He looked up at the Prince. 'Your first problem is the sewers. There are maybe a dozen conduits leading up from the docks to Fish Town. You'll have to block each one. One of them is so big you'll need to block it with a crew in a boat.'

Aaron Cook said, "The trouble is we don't know where in Fish Town they're hiding."

"If that's where they are," said Arutha.

Cook said, "I doubt if the Upright Man would even mention it had he not a good notion that they're down there somewhere."

Hull nodded agreement. "That's a fact. I can't think of any place else in the city they could be hiding. The Upright Man would've pinned down the location as soon as a Mocker caught a glimpse of the first Nighthawk. Even though the thieves use a lot of the sewers to skulk about in, there are parts they don't pass through much. And Fish Town is worse. The older fisher families are independent and tough, almost clannish. If someone took up residence in one of the old shacks near the

docks, kept to himself. . . Even the Mockers only get silence from the Fish Town folk when they ask questions. Should the Nighthawks have infiltrated slowly, no one but the locals might have a hint. It's a regular warren there, little streets all twisted about.' He shook his head. 'This part of the map's useless. Half the buildings shown here are burned down. Shacks and hovels built anywhere there's room. It's a mess in there.' He looked at the Prince. 'Another name for Fish Town is the Maze.' Jimmy said, 'Trevor's right. I've been in Fish Town as much as anyone in the Mockers, and that's not' much. There's nothing worth stealing in there. But he's wrong about one thing. The biggest problem isn't blocking escape routes. It's locating the Nighthawks. There are a lot of honest folk living in that part of town and you just can't ride in and kill everyone. We've got to find their hideout.' He considered. 'From what I know of the Nighthawks, they'll want some place that's first of all defensible, then easy to flee. They'll

probably be here

His finger pointed to a spot on the map. Trevor Hull said, 'It's a possibility. That building is nestled against those two walls, so they've only two fronts to cover. And there's a network of tunnels below the streets there, and those tunnels are all small and difficult to navigate unless you've been there before. Yes, it's a likely place. Jimmy looked at Arutha. 'I'd better go change.'

Arutha said, 'I don't like the need, but you're the best equipped to scout.' Cook looked at Hull, who nodded slightly. 'I could come along.' Jimmy shook his head. 'You know parts of the sewers

better than I, Aaron, but I can slip in and out without making the water ripple. You haven't the knack. And there's no possible way you can get into Fish Town unnoticed, even on a noisy night like this. I'll be safer if I go alone.' Arutha said, 'Shouldn't you wait?'

Jimmy shook his head. 'If I can locate their warren before they know they've been discovered, we may be able to clean them out before they know what hit them. People do funny things sometimes, even assassins. It being a festival day, their sentries will probably not expect someone nosing around. And, with the city in celebration, there will be lots of noises filtering down from the streets. Odd and out-of-place sounds will be less likely to alert anyone below the buildings. And if I have to poke around above ground, a strange poor boy in Fish



Town isn't as likely to be noticed this night as much as other nights. But I need to go at once.'

"You know best,' said Arutha. "But they'll react should they discover someone's seeking them out. One glimpse of you and they'll come straight after me.'

Jimmy noticed Arutha didn't seem troubled by that

fact alone. It seemed to Jimmy the Prince wouldn't mind an open confrontation. No, Jimmy knew what bothered him was his concern for the safety of others. "That goes without saying. But chances are excellent they're coming after you tonight anyway. The palace is crawling with strangers.' Jimmy looked out the window at the late afternoon sunset. 'it's almost seven hours after noon. If I were planning an attack on you, I'd wait about another two or three hours, just when the celebration is at its height. Performers and guests will be going in and out of the gates. Everyone will be half-drunk, tired from a day-long celebration, and feeling very relaxed. But I wouldn't wait much after that or your guards might notice a late arriving guest entering the grounds. If you stay alert you should be safe enough while I snoop around. I'll report back as soon as I have a hint.'

Arutha indicated permission for Jimmy to withdraw.

Quickly Trevor Hull and his first mate followed, leaving a troubled, seething Prince alone with his thoughts.

Arutha sat back, balled fist held before his mouth as his eyes stared off into nothing.

He had faced the minions of Murmandamus near the Black Lake, Moraelin, but the final contest was yet to come. Arutha cursed himself for becoming complacent over the last year. When he had first returned with Silverthorn, the key to saving Anita from the effects of the Nighthawks' poison, he had been nearly ready to return at once to the north. But the affairs of court, his own marriage, the trip to Rillanon to attend his brother's Wedding to Queen Magda, then Lord Caldric's funeral, the birth of his sons, all these had come and gone without his attending to the business north of the Kingdom. Beyond the great ranges lay the Northlands. There lay the seat of his enemy's power. There Murmandamus marshalled his forces. And from that seat far to the north he was reaching down again to touch the life of the Prince of Krondor, the Lord of the West, the man fated by prophecy to be his undoing, the Bane of Darkness. Should he live. And again Arutha found himself struggling within the confines of his own demesne, the battle carried to his own door. Striking his palm with his fist, Arutha voiced a low, harsh curse. To himself and whatever gods listened, he vowed that when this business in Krondor was finished, he, Arutha

conDom, would carry the struggle northward to murmandamus.

The darkness hid a thousand treasures amid a million pieces of worthless garbage. The waters in the sewers flowed slowly, and often large clumps of debris would gather in a jam called a tot. The tofsmen who picked over such rotting refuse earned their living gleaning valuables lost into the sewers. They also kept the refuse flowing by breaking up the jams of garbage that threatened to back up the sewers. Little of this concerned Jimmy, save that a tofsman was standing less than twenty feet away. The young squire had dressed all in black, save for his

old, comfortable boots. He had even purloined an executioner's black hood from the torture chamber. Beneath the black he wore more simple garb, needed to blend into the Poor Quarter. The tofsman looked directly at the boy several times, but for all his peering Jimmy did not exist. For the better part of half an hour, Jimmy had stood

motionless in the deep shadows of an intersection, while the old tofsman picked over the smelly mess passing by. Jimmy hoped this wasn't the man's chosen location to work, otherwise he could be there for hours. Jimmy even more fervently hoped the tofsman was real and not a disguised Nighthawk lookout. Finally the man wandered off, and Jimmy relaxed though he did not move until the tofsman had had ample time to vanish down a side tunnel. Then, with stealth bordering on the unnatural, Jimmy crept along the tunnel toward the area below the heart of Fish Town. Down a series of tunnels he travelled silently. Even as he stepped into water, he managed to disturb it only slightly. The gifts of nature - lightning-fast reflexes, "astonishing coordination, and the ability to make decisions, to react nearly instantaneously - had been augmented by training from the Mockers and forged in the harshest furnace: the daily life of a working thief. Jimmy made each move as if his life depended upon remaining undetected, for it did.

Down the dark conduits of the sewers he journeyed his senses extended into the darkness. He knew how to ignore the faint sounds coming down from the streets above and how the slight echoes of rippling water rebounding from the stonework should sound, the slightest variation would warn of anyone lurking out of view. The noisome air of the sewer masked any potentially warning odours, but the air was almost motionless, so he would have a betraying hint of movement close by should anyone suddenly come at him. A sudden shift in the air, and Jimmy froze.

Something had changed, and the boy immediately shrank down into the sheltering darkness of a low, overhanging brickwork. From a short distance ahead, he heard the faint grind of leather on metal and knew someone was descending a ladder from the street above. A slight disturbance in the water caused the boy to tense. Someone had stepped into the sewer and was walking in his direction, someone who moved almost as silently as he.

Jimmy hunkered down, as small as he could make himself in the dark, and watched. In the gloom, black against black, he could half-see, half-sense a figure moving toward him. Then, from behind, light showed and Jimmy could see the approaching man. He was

slender, wearing a cloak, and armed. He turned and whispered harshly, 'Cover that damn lantern.'

But in that instant, Jimmy could see a face well known to him. The man in the sewer was Arutha - or at least resembled him enough to fool any but his closest intimates. Jimmy held his breath, for the bogus Prince was

passing only a few feet away. Whoever followed shut the lantern, and darkness enveloped the tunnel, hiding Jimmy from discovery again. Then he heard the second man pass. Listening for sounds indicating others, Jimmy waited until he felt certain no one else was coming. He quickly, but quietly, rose from his hiding spot and went to where the two men had emerged from the gloom. Three tunnels intersected, and he would have to spend time determining which had provided entrance to the sewers for the false Prince and his companion. Jimmy weighed his options briefly, then placed the need to follow the pair above the need to discover the entrance to the sewer employed. Jimmy knew this part of the sewers as well as any in

Krondor, but if he fell too far behind he would lose them. He slipped through the dark, listening at each intersection for the sounds that told him where his quarry moved. Through the murky passages under the city the boy

hurried, slowly overtaking the two men. Once he caught a glimpse of light, as if the shuttered lantern had been uncovered slightly so the travellers might gain their bearings. Jimmy followed after it.

Then Jimmy rounded a corner, and a sudden movement in the air gave warning. He dodged and felt something pass close to where his head had been, accompanied by a grunt of exertion. He pulled his dirk

and turned toward the sound of breathing, holding his

own breath. Fighting in the dark was an exercise in controlled terror. Each man could die from an overactive imagination as he sought a clue to the exact position of his opponent. Sounds, illusory movement seen from the corner of the eye, a feeling about where the foe stood, all could cause a miscue that would give away a location, bringing sudden death. Both men stood frozen for a long moment.

Jimmy sensed a scurrying and instantly recognized the presence of a rat, a large one by the sound, moving away from trouble. He aborted a lunge in that direction before it was begun and waited. His opponent also heard the rat, but lashed at it, striking the stone. The ring of steel on stone was all Jimmy needed and he thrust with his dirk, feeling the point strike deep. The man stiffened, then with a low sigh collapsed into the water. The combat had taken three blows, from the first at Jimmy in the dark to the one that ended it.

- Jimmy pulled his dirk free and listened. There was no sign of the man's companion. The youngster swore silently. While he was free of another attack, it had also allowed the other man freedom to escape. Jimmy sensed a source of heat nearby and almost burned his hand on the metal lantern. Uncovering the shutter, he examined his foe. The man was a stranger, but Jimmy knew he was a Nighthawk. No other possible explanation could account for his presence in the sewers with an exact double of the Prince. Jimmy checked the body and found the ebon hawk worn next to the skin and the black poison ring. There was no longer any doubt. The Nighthawks were back. Jimmy steeled himself and quickly cut open the man's chest, removing the heart and casting it into the sewer. With the Nighthawks one never knew which were likely to rise again and serve their master, so it was best to take no chances.

Jimmy abandoned the lantern, left the body to float toward the sea with the other garbage, and began his return to the palace. He hurried, regretting the time lost in dealing with the corpse. Splashing noisily toward the nearest exit back to the surface, Jimmy was confident the false Prince was long gone. As he rounded a corner, a sudden alarm sounded in his head, for an echo had rung false. Dodging, he was a moment late. He avoided a sword blade slash but took a blow to the head from the hilt. He was knocked hard against the wall, his head striking brick. Pitching forward, he landed in the centre of the sewer channel, going under muck-covered water. Half-dazed, he managed to roll over, getting his face above the scum. Through a grey haze, he could hear someone splashing in the water a short distance away. In a strange detached way he knew someone was looking

for him. But the lantern lay back where the first man had fallen, and in the dark the boy drifted away from the man who vainly sought to find him and end his life.

Hands shook at the boy, dragging him from an odd halfream. He had thought it strange he should be floating in the darkness, for he had to meet with the Prince at Krondor. But he couldn't find his good boots and Master of Ceremonies deLacy would never allow him into the great hall in his old ones.

Opening his eyes, Jimmy discovered a leathery face hovering over his own. A toothless smile greeted his return to full consciousness. "Well, well," said the old man with a chuckle. "You're back with us again. You are. I've seen all manner of things floating in the sewers over the years. Never thought I'd see the royal hangman tossed into the scumways, though." He continued to chuckle, his t e dane

his face a grotesque dancing mask in the guttering candlelight . Jimmy ,couldn't make sense of the old man's words, until he remembered the hood he had worn. The old man must have removed it. "Who. . .?"

"Tolly I'm called, young Jimmy the Hand." He chuckled. "Must have come to some difficulty to find yourself in such a fix."

"How long?"

"Ten, fifteen minutes. I heard the splashing about and went to see what's to-do. Found you floating. Thought you dead. So I pulled you away to see if you carried gold. That other one was fit to bust he couldn't find you." Again the chuckle. "He'd have found you certain if you'd been left to float. But I hauled you to this little tunnel I uses for a hidey and I'd lit no light till he was on his way. Found this," he said, returning Jimmy's pouch.

"Keep it. You've saved my life, and more. Where's the

nearest way to the street?"

The man helped Jimmy to his feet. "You will find stairs to the basement of Teech's Tannery. It's abandoned. It's on the Avenue of Smells." Jimmy nodded. The street was Collington's Road, but all in the Poor Quarter called it the Avenue of Smells because of the tanneries, slaughterhouses, and dyers located there.

Tally said, "You're gone from the guild, Jimmy, but word's come down you might be poking about here and there, so I'll tell you the password tonight is "finch". I don't know who those blokes fighting you were, but I've seen an odd crew down here the last three days. I guess things move apace."

Jimmy realized this simple tofsman was trusting to the

higher-ups in the Mockers to deal with the intruders in his domain. "Yes, they will be dealt with in a matter of days.' Jimmy considered. "Look, there's more than thirty gold in that pouch. Take word to Alvarny the quick. Tell him matters are as suspected and my new master will act at once, I'm certain. 'then take the gold and have some fun for a few days.'

The man fixed Jimmy with a %toothless grin. 'Stay ole

ith a squint, grinning his  
what you're saying? Wel  
id

tthen, I might spend a day or two drinking up your gold.  
That enough?'

Jimmy said, 'Yes, two days will see this business over.'  
As he moved toward the tunnel that would lead to his exit to the streets, he added, 'One way or the other.' He looked about in the gloom and discovered he had been pulled back toward the place where he had first encountered the two Nighthawks. Pointing toward the intersection, he asked, 'Is there a metal ladder nearby?' 'Three that can be used.' He indicated their locations. "Thanks again, Tally. Now, quickly, carry my message

the tofsman waded away into a large tunnel, and

Jimmy began his inspection of the nearest ladder. It was rusty and dangerous, as was the second, but the third was newly repaired and firmly anchored in the stones. Jimmy quickly climbed to the top and examined the trapdoor above. it was wood and therefore part of a building floor.

Jimmy considered his position relative to Teech's Tannery. If his sense of direction wasn't off. he was under the building he had thought likely to be the Nighthawks' hideout. He listened at the trap for a long minute, hearing nothing. Gently he pushed upward, peeking through the tiny

crack made by the rising door. Directly before his nose was a pair of boots, crossed at the ankles. Jimmy froze. When the feet didn't move, he pushed the trap an inch higher. The feet in the boots belonged to a nasty-looking customer who was sound asleep, a half.empty bottle clutched tightly to his chest. From the cloying odour in the room, Jimmy knew the man had been drinking paga - a potent brew, heavily spiced and laced with a perfume-sweet mild narcotic, imported from Kesh. Jimmy chanced a quick glance about. Aside from the sleeping sentry the room was empty, but faintly heard

voices came from the single door in the nearby wall. Jimmy drew a silent breath and noiselessly emerged from the trap, avoiding touching the sleeping guard. He moved with a single step to the door and listened. The voices were faint. A tiny crack in the wooden door allowed Jimmy to peek through.

He could see only the back of one man and the face of another. From the manner in which they were speaking, it was clear there were others in the room as well, and from the sound of movement, some number of them, perhaps a dozen. Jimmy glanced about and nodded to himself. This was the headquarters of the Nighthawks. And these men were Nighthawks, beyond doubt. Even if he hadn't seen the ebon hawk on the man he had killed, those in the next room were nothing like the common folk of FISH Town.

Jimmy wished he could better scout the building, for there were at least a half-dozen other rooms, but the restless sounds of the sleeping man alerted the former thief that time was quickly running out. The false Prince would be inside the Palace soon, and while Jimmy could run down the streets whereas the false Arutha had to slog through the sewers, it would be a close thing who would be at the palace first.

Jimmy quietly left the door and moved back to the trap. He gently lowered it overhead. As he reached a point halfway between the trap and the sewer, he heard voices from directly overhead. "Matthew!"

Jimmy's heart leaped as the other voice said, 'What!' "If you've drunk yourself asleep, I'll have your eyes for

dinner.'

The other voice answered irritably, 'I only closed my eyes for a minute, just as you walked in, and don't threaten me or the crows will have your liver.'

Jimmy heard the trap being lifted, and without hesitation swung himself around to the side of the ladder. He hung in midair, only one hand and boot on the small rungs as he flattened himself against the wall, barely holding on to scant hand- and footholds in the rough stones. He trusted his black clothing in the gloom - and the fact the eyes of those above would take time to adjust to the darkness of the sewer - to hide him. A light was shone from above and Jimmy averted his face, the only part of him not black, and held his breath. For a long, terror-filled moment he hung in space, arm and leg burning with fatigue with the strain of holding himself motionless. Not daring to look upward, he could only imagine what the two Nighthawks above might be doing. Even at this moment they could be drawing weapons. A crossbow could be aiming at his skull and in an instant he

could be dead, his life blotted out without warning. He heard feet scuffling about and laboured breathing above where he hung and then a voice said, "See? Nothing. Now, leave it, or you'll be floating with the other garbage.' Jimmy almost flinched when the trap was slammed

closed above him. He silently counted to ten, then quickly scampered down the ladder to the water and moved off. With the bickering voices fading behind, Jimmy headed towards Teech's Tannery, and the way back to the palace.

The night was half over, but the celebration was still in full swing. Jimmy hurried through the palace, ignoring the startled people he passed. This apparition in black was a most uncommon sight. He was battered, an angry lump decorating his visage, and he reeked of the sewer. Twice Jimmy asked the guards about the Prince's whereabouts and was informed the Prince was en route to his private quarters.

Jimmy passed a startled pair of familiar faces as Cardan and Roald the mercenary stood speaking. The Knight-Marshal of Krondor looked tired from a long day yet unfinished and Laurie's boyhood friend looked halffrunk. Since returning from Moraelin, Roald had been a guest in the palace, though he still refused Cardan's constant offer of a place in Arutha's guard. Jimmy said, 'You'd better come along.' Both took the boy at his word and fell into step. Jimmy said, 'You won't believe what they're up to this time.' Neither man had to be told who 'they' were. Cardan had just informed Roald of the Upright Man's warning. And both men had faced the Nighthawks and Black Slayers of Murmandamus at Arutha's side before.

Rounding the corner, the three found Arutha about to open the door to his quarters. The Prince halted, waiting for the three to come close, an expression of open curiosity on his face.

Cardan said, 'Highness, Jimmy's discovered something.'

Arutha said. 'Come along. I have a few things I must attend to at once, so you'll have to be brief.'

The Prince pushed open the door and led them through the antechamber to his private council room. As he reached for the door, it opened.

Roald's dark eyes widened. Before them stood another Arutha. The Prince in the door looked at them, saying, 'What. .?'. Suddenly both Aruthas were drawing weapons. Roald and Cardan hesitated; what their eyes told them was impossible. Jimmy watched as the two Princes engaged each other in combat, the "second"



Arutha, the one who had come from within, leaping back into the council chamber, gaining room to fight. Cardan shouted for guards and in a moment a full dozen were approaching the door.

Jimmy watched closely. The resemblance was unanny. He knew Arutha as well as he knew anyone else in the Palace, but while the two men fought a furious

duel, he couldn't tell them apart. The impostor even fought with the same skill with the blade as the Prince. Cardan said, 'Seize them both.'

Jimmy shouted, "Wait. If you grab the wrong one first, the impostor may kill him." Cardan instantly countermanded his own order.

The two combatants thrust and parried, moving about the room. Each man's face was set in a mask of grim determination. Then Jimmy raced across the room, no hesitation marking his lunge for one of the men. Striking out with his dirk, Jimmy knocked him backward. Guards flooded into the room, seizing the other combatant as Cardan ordered. The Knight-Marshal was uncertain what Jimmy was doing, but he was taking no chances. Both men would be held until the matter was sorted out. Jimmy grappled on the floor with one of the Aruthas, who struck out with a backhand blow, stunning Jimmy and knocking him aside. That Arutha began to rise to his feet, then halted as Roald levelled his sword point at the man's throat. The man on the floor shouted, 'The boy's gone mad. Guards! Seize him!' Then, as he rose, he clutched at his side. His hand came away covered in blood. The man looked pale and began to wobble. He appeared on the verge of fainting. The other Arutha stood quietly, enduring the restraining hands of the guards. Jimmy shook his head, clearing it from the effects of

the second serious blow of the day. Seeing the condition of the wounded man, Jimmy yelled.

'Ware a ring.' As the boy spoke, the wounded man placed his hand before his mouth, and as Roald and a guard seized him, he slumped down, unconscious. Roald said, "His royal signet is false. It's a poison ring such as the others wore.' The guards released the real Arutha who said, "Did he use it?'

Cardan inspected the ring. 'No, he passed out from his wound.'

Roald said, 'The likeness is unbelievable. Jimmy, how'd you know?'

'I saw him in the sewers.'

'But how did you know he was the impostor?' asked Cardan.

'The boots. They're covered in muck.'

Cardan looked at Arutha's polished black boots and the impostor's mud-encrusted pair. Arutha said, "it's a good thing I didn't take a walk through Anita's newly planted garden today. You'd have had me in my own dungeon. '

Jimmy studied the fallen impostor and the real Prince.

Both men wore the same cut and colour of clothing.

Jimmy said to Arutha, 'When we came through the door were you with us or already in the room?'

'I entered with you. He must have come into the palace with the late celebrants and simply walked into my quarters.'

Jimmy agreed. "He hoped to catch you here, kill you, dump your body in one of the secret passages or down the sewer, and take your place. I don't think he could have maintained the charade long, but if only for a few days he could have bollixed things up around here to a fare-thee-well. '

'You've done well one more time, Jimmy.' He asked Roald, 'Will he live!'

Roald examined him. 'I don't know. These lads have a bothersome habit of dying when they shouldn't, then not staying dead when they should.'

"Get Nathan and the others. Take him to the east tower. Cardan, you know what to do.'

Jimmy watched while Father Nathan, a priest of Sung the White and one of Arutha's advisers, examined the assassin. Each person who was admitted to the tower selected to house the prisoner was astonished at the likeness. Captain Valdis, a broad-shouldered man who had been Cardan's chief lieutenant and had succeeded him as head of Arutha's guard, shook his head. 'No wonder the lads did nothing but salute when he walked in the palace, Highness. He's your exact double.'

The wounded man lay tied to the bedposts. As before when a Nighthawk had been captured, he had been stripped of his poison ring and any other possible means of committing suicide. Nathan stood away from the prisoner's side. The stocky priest said, 'He's lost blood and his breathing's shallow. It would be touch and go under normal circumstances.'

The royal surgeon nodded agreement. 'I'd say he'd make it, Highness, if I hadn't seen their willingness to die before.' He looked out the window of the room as the morning light began to pour through. They had worked for hours repairing the damage done by Jimmy's dirk. Arutha considered. The last attempt at interrogating a Nighthawk had produced only an animated corpse who had killed several guards and had almost murdered the

High Priestess of Lims-Kragma and the Prince himself. He said to Nathan. 'if he regains consciousness, use what arts you can to discover what he knows. If he dies, burn the body at once.' To Cardan, Jimmy, and Roald he said, 'Come with me,' and to Valdis, 'Captain, double the guards at once, quietly.'

Leaving the heavily guarded room, he led his companions toward his own quarters. 'With Anita and the babies safely on their way to her mother's, I need only worry about rooting out these assassins before they find another way to reach me.'

Cardan said, 'But Her Highness hasn't left yet.'

Arutha spun. 'What? She bade me goodbye at first light an hour ago.'

'Perhaps, Sire, but it seems a thousand details are still left. Her baggage was only loaded a little while ago. The guards have been ready for two hours, but I don't think the carriages have left yet.'

'Then hurry and make sure they're safe until they've gone . '

Cardan ran off and Arutha, Jimmy, and Roald continued on their way. Arutha said, "You know what we face. Of all here, only those of us who were at Moraelin truly know what sort of enemy stands behind this. You also know it is a war without quarter, until one side or the other ends in utter defeat.'

Jimmy nodded, a little surprised at Arutha's tone.

Something in this latest attack had touched a nerve.

Since Jimmy had known the Prince, Arutha had always been a cautious man, careful to consider all the information at his disposal in making the best judgments he was able. The only exception Jimmy had witnessed had been when Anita lay injured by Laughing Jack's errant crossbow bolt. Then Arutha had changed. Now, as when Anita was nearly killed, he again seemed a man on the edge of possession, a man full of rage at this invasion of his sanctum. The well-being of his person and his family was in jeopardy and he showed a barely controlled killing rage toward those responsible.

"Find Trevor Hull again,' he told Jimmy. 'I want his best men ready to move after sundown tonight. Have him come with Cook as soon as possible. I'll want plans made with Cardan and Valdis.'

'Roald, your task is to keep Lauric busy today. He's sure to tumble something's amiss when I don't hold court this afternoon. Keep him preoccupied with something, perhaps with a visit to old haunts in the city, and keep him away from the east tower.' Jimmy looked surprised.

'Now that he and Carline are married, I'll risk only one member of her family He's just foolish enough to want to come along.' Roald and Jimmy exchanged glances. Both anticipated

what the Prince planned for tonight. Arutha's expression became thoughtful. "Go on, I've just remembered something I need to discuss with Nathan. Send word when Hull's returned." Without further discussion, they headed off to their appointed tasks while Arutha returned to the room to speak with the priest of Sung.

3

## Murder

Armed men stood ready.

Krondor was still celebrating, for Arutha had proclaimed a second day of festival, with the weak explanation that as there were two sons, there should be two days of Presentation. The announcement had been greeted with enthusiasm by all in the city save the palace staff, but Master of Ceremonies deLacy had quickly got things under control. Now, with the celebrants still crowding inns and alehouses, as the festive mood of the day before seemed to increase, the passing of many men - seemingly off duty, upon one errand or another, not acknowledging one another - was scarcely noticed. But by midnight they had gathered in five locations: the common room of the Rainbow Parrot Inn, three widely scattered warehouses controlled by the Mockers, and aboard the Royal Raven.

At a prearranged signal, the incorrect ringing of the time by the city watch, the five companies would begin to make their way toward the stronghold of the brotherhood of assassins.

Arutha led the company assembling at the Rainbow Parrot. Trevor Hull and Aaron Cook commanded the seamen and soldiers entering the sewers by boats. Jimmy, Cardan, and Captain Valdis would lead the companies hiding in the old warehouses through the streets of the Poor Quarter.

Jimmy glanced around as the last soldiers slipped quietly through the narrowly opened doors of the warehouse. The Mockers' storage house for stolen goods was now thoroughly crowded. He returned his attention to the single window, through which he observed the street that led straight to the Nighthawks' stronghold. Roald consulted an hour glass he had turned when the last hour had been rung by the city watch. Soldiers listened by the door of the warehouse. Jimmy again glanced at the assembled company. Laurie, who had unexpectedly appeared with Roald an hour before, gave Jimmy a nervous smile. "It's more comfortable than the caves below Moraelin."

Jimmy returned a half-smile to the uninvited participant in the night's raid. 'Right.' He knew the singer turned noble was laughing off the worry they all felt. They were ill prepared in many ways and had no sense of how many servants of Murmandamus they faced. But the appearance of the false Prince had heralded a new round of assaults by the moredhel's agents and Arutha had been emphatic about the need for speed. It had been Arutha's decision to assemble his raiders quickly and attack the Nighthawks before another dawn came to Krondor. Jimmy had urged more time to scout the area, but the Prince had remained intractable. Jimmy had made the mistake of confiding to Arutha how close he had come to being discovered. Also, Nathan reported the impostor now dead, and Arutha had said they had no way of knowing if he had accomplices in the palace, or his compatriots other means of learning of his success or failure. They ran the risk of discovering an ambush or, worse yet, an empty nest. Jimmy understood the Prince's impatience, but still wished for one more scouting trip. They couldn't even be certain they'd blocked all avenues

of escape. They had sought to increase their chances of success by

sending large amounts of ale and wine into the city, 'gifts' from the Prince to the citizens. They were aided by

the Mockers, who diverted a disproportionate number of barrels and casks into the Poor Quarter, especially Fish Town. The honest population of Fish Town - however small a number that might be, thought Jimmy ruefully would be happily in its collective cups by now. Then someone said, 'Watch bell's ringing.'

Roald glanced at the glass. There was still a quarter hour's sand in it. 'That's the signal.'

Jimmy was first through the door, leading the way. His company of seasoned soldiers would reach the Nighthawks' lair first. Jimmy was the only one who had had even a glimpse of the interior of the building, so he volunteered to flush them out. Cardan and Valdis's companies would be in close support, flooding the streets surrounding the target building with soldiers in the Prince's tabards as Jimmy's men assaulted the stronghold. The companies under Arutha and Trevor Hull had already entered the sewers through the basement trapdoor in the Rainbow Parrot and the smugglers' tunnel at the dock. They were already closing in below the Nighthawks and would be responsible for blocking any escape routes in the sewers the assassins would likely take.

Soldiers fanned out to either side, hugging the shadows

as they moved quickly down the narrow street. The orders had called for stealth if possible, but with this many armed men moving at once, speed was more important. And the orders had been to attack at once should they be spotted. Jimmy scouted about after reaching the intersection closest to the Nighthawks' building and discovered no guards in sight. He waved toward two narrow side streets, indicating the need to block them, and soldiers hurried to comply. When they were in position. Jimmy moved toward the entrance of the building. The last twenty yards to the door were the trickiest, for there was little cover in sight. Jimmy knew the Nighthawks probably kept the area before the door free of concealing debris against the possibility of a night such as this. He also knew there was likely at least one lookout in the second floor corner room overlooking the two streets leading to the intersection where nestled the building. A distant sound of metal on stone echoed from the other approach to the building, and Jimmy knew Gardan's men were also approaching, just as Valdis's company would be coming up behind Jimmy's. He saw movement in the second storey window and froze a moment. He had no idea if he had been spotted, but knew if he had, someone would be out quickly to investigate unless he could allay suspicions. He staggered away from the wall a moment, then fell forward, arms outstretched to support himself, another drunk vomiting excess wine from a tormented stomach. Turning his head, he knew Roald was only a short distance behind in the gloom. Between loud retching noises, he softly said, 'Get ready.'

After a moment he resumed a staggering walk toward the corner building. He paused once more, then continued on. The entire way, he sang a simple ditty, as if to himself, hoping he passed for a late celebrant on his way home. Nearing the entrance of the building, he staggered away, as if to turn the corner to the next street, then jumped to the wall next to the door. Jimmy held his breath and listened. A muffled sound, as if someone spoke, could be discerned. There seemed no tone of alarm. Jimmy nodded, then staggered out, a short way

down the connecting street to where Cardan's company waited. He leaned against the wall and feigned being sick again, then yelled something mindless and happy. He hoped that yell would momentarily distract the lookout. A dozen men quickly came up the street, carrying a light ram. and positioned themselves, while four bowmen nocked arrows behind them. They had a direct line Of fire into the windows on the second floor as well as the entrance to the building. Jimmy staggered back toward

the building, then when he reached a point below the window, he could see an inquisitive head stick out to follow his progress. The sentry had watched his performance and had not noticed the approaching raiders. Jimmy hoped Roald knew what to do.

An arrow sped through the night, showing the mercenary had seized the moment. If there was a second lookout above, they lost nothing by killing the first, but if not, they gained additional moments of surprise. The lookout seemed to lean further out, as if attempting to follow Jimmy's movement along the wall. He kept coming out the window, until he fell into the street a few feet behind the youngster. Jimmy ignored the body. One of Gardan's men would be cutting the man's heart out soon enough. Jimmy reached the door, pulled his rapier, and

signalled. The six men with the ram, a beam with a firehardened end, stepped forward. They quietly rested the end against the door, pulled back, took three swings, then on the fourth crashed the ram against the door. The door had been bolted, not barred, and exploded inward sending splinters flying from around the lockplate and men scrambling for weapons. Before the men who held the ram could let it fall and draw weapons, a flight of arrows sped past them. Roald and his men were through the door as the ram struck the stones and bounced.

The sounds of fighting, screams, and oaths filled the room as other voices shouted questions from other parts of the building. Jimmy took in the layout of the room with a single glance and swore in frustration. He spun to confront the sergeant leading the second company. 'They've opened doors to buildings on the other side of the walls behind this one. There're more rooms there!' He pointed to two doors through which questioning

shouts had issued. The sergeant led his detachment off at once, splitting his squad and sending men through both doors. Another sergeant led his group up the stairs, while Roald and Laurie's men overwhelmed the few assassins in the first room and began searching for trapdoors in the floor.

Jimmy ran to the door that he was certain led to the room above the sewer. He kicked open the door and found a dead Nighthawk and Arutha's men coming up through the trap. There was a second door out of the room and Jimmy thought he saw someone duck around a corner. Jimmy followed after, shouting for someone to follow him, and turned the corner. He dodged to one side, but no expected ambush remained. The last time they had fought the Nighthawks, Arutha's raiders had found the assassins determined to die rather than be

captured. This time they seemed more determined to flee'.

Jimmy ran down the corridor, a half-dozen soldiers at his heels. He pushed open a side door and found three dead Nighthawks on the floor of a room behind the first they had entered. Already soldiers prepared torches. Arutha's orders had been specific. All the dead were to have their hearts cut from their bodies and burned. No Black Slayers would rise from the grave this night to kill for Murmandamus.

Jimmy shouted, "Did anyone run by here?"

One soldier looked up. 'Didn't see anyone, squire, but we were busy up to a moment ago.'

Jimmy nodded once and ran down the hall. Rounding a corner, he discovered a hand-to-hand struggle under way in a connecting corridor. He dodged between guardsmen who were quickly overwhelming the assassins and ran toward another door. It was not entirely closed, as if someone had slammed it behind him but not stopped to see if it was shut. Jimmy shoved it wide and stepped into a broad alley. And across from him were three open and unguarded doors. Jimmy felt his heart sink. He turned to discover Arutha and Cardan behind him. Arutha cursed in frustration. What had once been a large burnt-out building had been replaced by several smaller ones, and where a solid wall had been, now doors invited passage. And not one of Arutha's soldiers had arrived in time to prevent anyone from fleeing by this route. "Did anyone escape this way?" asked the Prince.

'I don't know,' answered Jimmy. "One, I think, through one of these doors.'

A guard turned to Cardan and asked, "Shall we pursue, Marshal?"

Arutha turned back into the house as shouts of inquiry came from nearby buildings, from citizens of Fish Town awakened by the fighting. "Don't bother," said the Prince flatly. 'As certain as the sunrise, there are doors to other streets in those homes. We've failed this night.'

Cardan shook his head. 'if anyone was already here, they might have bolted as soon as they heard us attack.'

Other guards came up the narrow alley, many with bloodied clothing. One ran to the Prince. "We think two escaped down a side street, Highness.'

Arutha pushed past the man and re-entered the building. Reaching the main room, he found Valdis overseeing the guards as they conducted the grisly work of ensuring no undead assassins rose again. Grimly the men cut deeply into the chest of each dead man and removed his heart. The hearts were burned at once.'

A breathless sailor appeared and said, 'Your Highness,



Captain Hull says you should come quick.'

Arutha, Jimmy, and Cardan left the room, as Roald and Laurie came into view, weapons still in hand. Arutha regarded his blood-spattered brother-in-law and said, "What are you doing here?"

"I just came along to keep an eye on things,' he

answered. Roald looked sheepishly at the Prince as Laurie added, 'He could never learn to lie with a straight face. As soon as he asked me to go gambling, I knew something was up.'

Arutha waved away further comment and followed the sailor to the room leading to the sewer, and down the ladder, the others coming after him. They moved down a tunnel to where Hull and his men waited in their boats. Hull motioned for Arutha to board, and he and Cardan entered one boat, Jimmy, Roald, and Laurie another. They were rowed to a large convergence of six channels. A boat was tethered to a mooring ring in the stone, and from a trap in the ceiling above hung a rope ladder. "We stopped three boats of them coming out, but this one got past. When we reached here, they had all escaped.'

'How many?' asked the Prince.

'Maybe half a dozen,' answered Hull.

Arutha swore again. "We lost maybe two or three down a side street and now we know this lot got away. We may have as many as a dozen Nighthawks loose in the city.'

He paused a moment, then looked at Cardan, his eyes narrowing in controlled anger as he said, 'Kronador is now under martial law. Seal the city.'

For the second time in four years, Kronador endured martial law. When Anita had escaped from her captivity in her father's palace and Jocko Radburn, Guy du Bas-Tyra's captain of secret police, had sought her out, the city had been sealed. Now the Princess's husband searched out the city for possible assassins. The reasons might be different, but the effects on the populace were the ' same, And coming on the heels of celebration, martial law was a doubly bitter draught for the people to swallow.

Within hours of the order for martial law being given, the merchants began to troop to the palace to lodge their complaints. First came the ship brokers, whose commerce was the first disrupted as their vessels were held in port or denied entrance to the harbour. Trevor Hull led the squadron assigned to blockade duty, since the former smuggler knew every trick used to run a blockade. Twice ships attempted to leave and both times they were

intercepted and boarded, their captains were arrested and their crews confined to ship. In both cases it was quickly determined that the motive had been profit and not escape from Arutha's retribution. Still, since it was not known who they were searching for, any man arrested was kept in the city jail, the palace dungeon, or the prison barracks.

Soon the ship brokers were followed by the freight haulers, then the millers, when farmers were kept out of the city, then others, each with a reasonable request to have the quarantine of the city lifted for just his special case. All were denied.

Kingdom law was based upon the concept of the Great Freedom, the common law. Each man freely accepted service to his master, except the occasional criminal condemned to slavery or bondsman serving his indenture. Nobles received the benefits of rank in exchange for protecting those under their rule, and the network of vassalage rose from common farmer paying rent to his squire or baron, who paid taxes to his earl. In turn, the earl served his duke, who answered to the crown. But when the rights of free men were abused, those free men were quick to voice their displeasure. There were too many enemies within and without the boundaries of the Kingdom for an abusive noble to keep his position overly long. Raiding pirates from the Sunset Islands, Quegan privateers, goblin bands, and, always, the Brotherhood of the Dark Path - the dark elves demanded some internal stability in the Kingdom. Only once in its history had the populace borne oppression without open protest, under the rule of mad King Rodric, Lyam's predecessor, for the ultimate recourse to grievance, was the crown. Under Rodric, lese majesty had been reinstated as a capital crime and men could not express their grievances publicly. Lyam had again struck that offence from the laws of the land, as long as treason was not espoused, men were free to speak their minds. And the free men of Krondor spoke their displeasure loudly. Krondor became a city in turmoil, her stability a thing

of the past. For the first few days of martial law, there had been grumbling, but as the seal on the city entered its second week, shortages became commonplace. Prices rose as demand exceeded supply. When the first alehouse near the docks ran out of ale, a full scale riot ensued. Arutha ordered curfew.

Armed squads of the Royal Household Guard patrolled the streets alongside the normal city watch. Agents of both the Chancellor and the Upright Man eavesdropped on conversations, listening for hints to where the assassins lay.

And free men protested.

Jimmy hurried down' the hall toward the Prince's private chambers. He had been sent to carry messages to the commander of the city watch and was returning with the commander at his side. Arutha had become a man driven by his need to find the hidden assassins. He had put aside all other matters. The daily business of the Principality had slowed, then had finally come to a halt, while Arutha searched for the Nighthawks.

Jimmy knocked upon the door to the Prince's chamber, he and the commander of the watch were admitted.

Jimmy went to stand next to Laurie and Duchess Carline while the commander came to attention before the Prince. CJardan, Captain Valdis, and Earl Volney were arrayed behind the Prince's chair. Arutha looked up at the commander. "Commander Bayne? I sent you orders, I didn't request your presence.'

The commander, a greying veteran who had begun service thirty years before, said, 'Highness, I read your orders. I came back with the squire to confirm them.'

'They are correct as written, Commander. Now, is there anything else?'

Commander Bayne flushed, his anger apparent as he bit off each word. 'Yes, Highness. Have you lost your bloody mind?' Everyone in the room was stunned by the outburst. Before Cardan or Volney could censure the commander's remarks, he continued, "This order as written means I'll be putting over a thousand more men in the lockup. In the first place -Y

'Commander!' snapped Volney, recovering from his surprise. Ignoring the stout Earl, the commander plunged forward with his complaint. "In the first place, this business of arresting anyone "not commonly or well known to at least three citizens of good standing" means every sailor in Krondor for the first time, traveller, vagabond, minstrel, drunk, beggar, whore, gambler, and just plain stranger are to be whisked away without hearing before a magistrate, in violation of the common law. Second, I don't have the men to do the job properly. Third, I don't have enough cells for those who are to be picked up and questioned, not even enough for those who will stay, on due to unsatisfactory answers.

h I d

t Hell, I can barely find room for the ones who are already

behind bars. And last, the whole thing stinks to high heaven. Man, are you daft? You'll have open rebellion in the city within two weeks. Even that bastard Radburn never tried anything like this.'

.Commander, that will be enough!' roared Cardan. "You forget yourself.' said Volney'.

'it's His Highness who forgets himself, my lords. And unless lese majesty's been returned to the list of felonies of the Kingdom, I'll speak my mind.'

Arutha fixed the commander with a steady gaze. 'is that all?'

"Not by half," snapped the commander. 'Will you

rescind this order?'

Showing no emotion, Arutha said, 'No.'

The commander reached for his badge of rank and pulled it from his tunic. 'Then find another to punish the city, Arutha Condoin. I'll not do it.'

'fine.' Arutha took the badge. He handed it to Captain Valdis and said, 'Locate the senior watchman and promote him.'

The now former commander said, 'He'll not do it, highness. The watch is with me to a man.' He leaned forward, knuckles on Arutha's conference table, until his eyes were level with the Prince's. 'You'd better send in your army. My lads will have none of it. When this is over, it'll be them who'll be in the streets after dark, in twos and threes, trying to bring sanity back to a city gone mad and hateful. You brought this on; you deal with it.'

"Arutha spoke evenly. 'That will be all. You are dismissed.' He said to Valdis, 'Send detachments from the garrison and take command of the watch posts. Any watchman who wishes to stay employed is welcomed. Any who refuses this order is to be stripped of his tabard.'

Biting back hot words, the commander stiffly turned and left the room. Jimmy shook his head and shot a worried glance at Laurie. The former minstrel would understand as well as the former thief what sort of trouble was brewing in the streets.

For another week Krondor stagnated under martial law. Arutha turned a deaf ear to all requests to end the quarantine. By the end of the third week every man or woman who could not be properly identified was under arrest. Jimmy had communicated with agents of the Upright Man who assured Jimmy that the Mockers were conducting their own housecleaning. Six bodies had been found floating in the bay so far.

Now Arutha and his advisers were ready to conduct the business of interrogating the captives. A large section of warehouses in the north end of the city near the Merchants Gate had been converted to jails. Arutha, surrounded by a company of grim-faced guards, looked over the first five prisoners brought forward.

Jimmy stood off to one side and could hear a soldier

mumble to another, "At this rate we'll be here a year talking to all these lads.'

For a while Jimmy watched as Arutha, Cardan, Volney, and Captain Valdis questioned prisoners. Many were obviously simple fellows caught up in some business they didn't understand, or they were consummate actors. All looked filthy, ill fed, and half-frightened, half-defiant.

Jimmy became restless and left the scene. At the edge of the crowd he discovered that Laurie had taken a seat on a bench outside an ale house. Jimmy joined the Duke of Salador, who said, 'They've only some homemade left, and it's not cheap, but it's cool.' He looked on while Arutha continued the interrogations under the summer sun. Jimmy wiped his forehead. 'This is a sham. It accomplishes nothing.'

. 'it lessens Arutha's temper.'

'I've never seen him like this. Not even when we were racing to Moraelin. He's. . .'

'He's angry, frightened, and feeling helpless.' Laurie shook his head. 'I've learned a lot from Carline about my brothers-in-law. One thing about Arutha, if you don't already know: being helpless is something he can't abide. He's walked into a blind alley and his temper won't allow him to admit he's facing a stone wall. Besides, if he lifts the seal on the city, the Nighthawks are free to come and go, at will.'

"So what? They're in the city in any event, and no matter what Arutha thinks, there's no guarantee they're locked up. Maybe they've infiltrated the court staff the way they did the Mockers last year. Who knows?' Jimmy sighed. 'If Martin was here or maybe the King, we might have this business at an end.'

Laurie, drunk, and grimaced at the bitter taste.

'Maybe. You've named the only two men in the world he's likely to listen to. Carline and I've tried to talk to him, but he just listens patiently, then says no. Even Cardan and Volney can't budge him.'

Jimmy watched the Prince's interrogation for a little longer while three more groups of prisoners were brought out. "Well, some good's come of this. Four men have been turned loose. '

'And if they're picked up by another patrol, they'll be loosed into another lockup and it might be days before anyone gets around to checking out their claims to having been turned loose by the Prince. And the other eighteen, have been returned to the lockup. All we can hope for is Arutha's realizing soon that this will gain him nothing. The Festival of Banapis is less than two weeks

off, and if the seal isn't lifted by then, there'll be a

citywide riot.' Laurie's lips tightened in frustration.  
'Maybe if there was some magic way to tell who is a Nighthawk or not. . .'  
Jimmy sat up. 'What?'  
"What what?'

'What you just said. Why not?'  
Laurie turned slowly to face the squire. "What are you thinking?'  
'I'm thinking it's time to have a chat with Father Nathan. You coming?'  
Laurie put aside his mug of bitter beer and rose. "I've a horse tied up over there.'  
'We've ridden double before. Come along, Your Grace.  
For the first time in days, Laurie chuckled.

Nathan listened with his head tilted to one side while Jimmy finished his idea. The priest of Sung the White rubbed his chin a moment, looking more a former wrestler than a cleric, while he thought. 'There are magic means of impelling someone to tell the truth, but they are time consuming and not always reliable. I doubt we'd find such means any more useful than those' presently being employed.' His tone revealed he didn't think much of the means presently being employed.  
'What of the other temples?' inquired Laurie.  
"They have means differing little from our own, small

things in the way spells are constructed. The difficulties do not lessen . . .'  
Jimmy looked defeated. 'I had hoped for some way to pluck the assassins from the mass wholesale. I guess it isn't possible.'  
Nathan stood up behind the table in Arutha's conference room, appropriated while the Prince was overseeing the questioning. "only when a man dies and is taken into Lims-Kragma's domain are all questions answered.'  
Jimmy's expression clouded as a thought struck, then he brightened. "That could be it.'  
Laurie said, 'What could be it? You can't kill them all.'  
"No,' said Jimmy, dismissing the absurdity of the

remark. 'Look, can you get that priest of Lims-Kragma, Julian, to come here?'  
Nathan remarked dryly, 'You mean High Priest Julian of the Temple of Lims-Kragma? You forget he rose to supremacy when his predecessor was rendered mad by the attack in this palace.' Nathan's face betrayed a flicker of emotion, for the priest of Sung himself had defeated

the undead servant of Murmandamus, at no little cost. Nathan was still plagued by nightmares from that event. "oh," said Jimmy.

'if I request, he may grant us an audience, but I doubt he'll come running here just because I ask. I may be the Prince's spiritual adviser, but in temple rank I am simply a priest of modest achievements.'

'Well then see if he will see us. I think if he'll cooperate, we might find an end to all this madness in Krondor. But I'll want to have the Temple of Lims-Kragma's cooperation before I blab the idea to the Prince. He might not listen otherwise.'

'I'll send a message. It would be unusual for the temples to become involved in city business, but we've had closer relationships with each other and the officers of the Principality since the appearance of Murmandamus. Perhaps Julian will be kindly disposed to cooperate. I assume there's a plan in this?'

"Yes," said Laurie, "just what have you got up that voluminous sleeve of yours?'

Jimmy cocked his head and grinned. "You'll appreciate the theatre of it, Laurie. We'll whip up some mummerly and scare the truth out of the Nighthawks.'

The Duke of Salador sat back and thought on what the boy had said, after a moment of consideration, his blond beard was slowly parted by a widening grin. Nathan exchanged glances with the two as understanding came and he, too, began to smile, then to chuckle. Seeming to think he forgot himself, the cleric of the Goddess of the One Path composed himself, but again broke into an illconcealed fit of mirth.

Of the major temples in Krondor, the one least visited by the populace was that devoted to the Goddess of Death, Lims-Kragma - though it was commonly held that the goddess sooner or later gathered all to her. It was usual to give votive offerings and a prayer for the recently departed, but only a few worshipped with regularity. In centuries past, the followers of the Death Goddess had practised bloody rites, including human sacrifice. Over the years these practices had moderated and the faithful of Lims-Kragma had entered the mainstream of society. Still, past fears died slowly. And even now enough bloody work was done in the Death Goddess's name by fanatics to keep her temple tainted by a patina of horror for most common men. Now a band of such common men, with perhaps a few uncommon ones hidden among them, was being marched into that temple.

Arutha stood silently by the entrance to the inner sanctum of the Temple of Lims-Kragma. Armed guards

surrounded the antechamber while temple guards in the black and silver garb of their order filled the inner temple. Seven priests and priestesses stood arrayed in formal attire, as if for a high ceremony, under the supervision of the High Priest, Julian. At first the High Priest had been disinclined to participate in this charade. but as his predecessor had been driven past the brink of insanity by confronting the agent of Murmandamus, he was sympathetic to any attempts to balk that evil. Reluctantly he had agreed at the last.

The prisoners were herded forward, toward the dark entrance. Most held back and had to be shoved by spearwielding soldiers. The first band contained those judged most likely to be members of the brotherhood of assassins. Arutha had grudgingly agreed to this sham, but had insisted on having all suspected of being Nighthawks in the first batch to be "tested", in case the deception was revealed and word leaked back to the other prisoners being held.

When the reluctant prisoners were arraigned before the altar of the Goddess of Death, Julian intoned, 'Let the trial commence.' At once the attending priests, priestesses, and monks began a chant, one that carried a dark and chilling tone.

Turning to the fifty or so men held by the silent temple guards, the High Priest said, "Upon the altar stone of death, no man may speak falsehood. For before She Who Waits, before the Drawer of Nets, before the Lover of Life, all men must swear to what they have done. Know then, men of Krondor, that among your number are those who have rejected our mistress, those who have enlisted in the ranks of darkness and who serve evil powers. They are men who are lost to the grace of death, to the final rest granted by Lims-Kragma. These men are despisers of all, holding only to their evil master's will. Now they shall be separated from us. For each who lies upon the stone of the Goddess of Death will be tested, and each who speaks true will have nothing to fear. But those who have sworn dark compacts will be revealed and they shall face the wrath of She Who WaitS.'

The statue behind the altar, a jet stone likeness of a beautiful, stern-looking woman, began to glow, to pulse with strange blue-green lights. Jimmy was impressed, as he looked on with Laurie. The effect added a strong sense of drama to the moment.

Julian motioned for the first prisoner to be brought forward and the man was half dragged to the altar. Three strong guards lifted him up onto the altar, used ages past for human sacrifice, and Julian pulled a black dagger from his sleeve. Holding it over the man's chest, Julian



asked simply, "do you serve Murmandamus?"

The man barely croaked out a reply in the negative and Julian removed the dagger from over the man. "This man is free of guilt," intoned the priest. Jimmy and Laurie exchanged glances, for the man was one of Trevor Hull's sailors, ragged and rough looking in the extreme but above suspicion and, judging from the performance just given, not a mean actor. He had been planted to lend credibility to the proceedings, as had the second man, who was now being dragged to the altar. He sobbed piteously, yelling to be left alone, begging for mercy.

Behind an upraised hand, Jimmy said, 'He's overdoing it.'

Laurie whispered, 'it doesn't matter, the room stinks with fear.'

Jimmy regarded the assembled prisoners, who stared with fascination at the proceedings while the second man was judged innocent of being an assassin. Now the guards grabbed the first man to be truly tested. He had the half-captivated look of a bird confronting a snake and was led quickly to the altar. When four other men were led without protest, Arutha crossed to stand next to Laurie and Jimmy. Shielding them from the gaze of the prisoners by turning his back on the proceedings, he whispered, 'This isn't going to work.'

Jimmy said, 'We may not have dragged a Nighthawk up there yet. Give it time. If everyone comes through the test, you still have them all under guard.'

Suddenly a man near the front of the prisoners made a dash for the door, knocking aside two temple guards. At once Arutha's guards at the door blocked his exit. The man hurled himself at them, forcing the guards back. In the scramble he reached for a dagger and attempted to strip it from a guard's belt. His hand was struck, and the dagger skittered freely across the floor, while another guard smashed him across the face with the haft of a spear. The man dropped to the stone floor.

Jimmy, like the others, was intent upon the attempt to restrain the man. Then, as if time slowed, he saw another prisoner calmly bend over and pick up the dagger. With cool purpose the man stood, turned, reversed the dagger, and held the blade between thumb and forefinger. He pulled back his arm, and, as Jimmy's mouth opened to shout a warning, he threw the dagger..

Jimmy sprang forward to knock Arutha aside, but he was a moment too late. The dagger struck. A priest cried, "Blasphemy." at the attack. Then all looked toward the Prince. Arutha staggered, his eyes widening with astonishment as he stared down at the blade protruding from his chest. Laurie and Jimmy both caught his arms,

holding him up. Arutha looked at Jimmy, his mouth moving silently as if trying to speak were the most difficult task imaginable. Then his eyes rolled up into his head and he slumped forward, still held up by Laurie and Jimmy.

Jimmy sat quietly while Roald paced the room. Carline sat opposite the boy, lost in her own thoughts. They waited outside Arutha's bedchamber while Father Nathan and the royal surgeon worked feverishly to save Arutha's life. Nathan had showed no regard for rank as he had ordered everyone out of Arutha's room, refusing even to let Carline glimpse her brother. At first Jimmy had judged the wound serious but not fatal. He had seen men survive worse, but now the time was dragging on and the young man began to fret. By now Arutha should have been resting quietly, but there had been no word from within his chambers. Jimmy feared this meant complications.

He closed his eyes and rubbed at them a moment, sighing aloud. Again he had acted, but too late to stave off disaster. Fighting back his own feelings of guilt, he was startled when a voice next to him said, "Don't blame yourself."

He looked to find Carline had moved to sit beside him. With a faint smile he said, 'Reading minds, Duchess?' She shook her head, fighting back tears. "No. I just remembered how hard you took it when Anita was injured."

Jimmy could only nod. Laurie came in and crossed to the door of the bedchamber to speak quietly to the guard. The guard quickly entered and returned a moment later, whispering an answer. Laurie went over to his wife, kissed her lightly on the cheek, and said, 'I've dispatched riders to fetch Anita back and lifted the quarantine.' As senior noble in the city, Laurie had assumed a position of authority, working with Volney and Cardan to restore order to a city in turmoil. While the crisis was likely over, certain restraints were kept in force, to prevent any backlash from angry citizens. Curfew would stay in effect for a few more days, and large gatherings would be dispersed.

Laurie spoke softly. "I've more duties to discharge. I'll be back shortly." He rose and left the antechamber. Time dragged on.

Jimmy remained lost in thought. In the short time he had been with the Prince his world had changed radically. From street boy and thief to squire had entailed a complete shift in attitudes toward others, though some vestige of his former wariness had stood him in good stead when dealing with court intrigue. Still,

the Prince and his family and friends had become the only people in Jimmy's life who meant something to the boy, and he feared for them. His disquiet had grown in proportion to the passing hours and now bordered on alarm. The ministrations of the surgeon and the priest were taking far too long. Jimmy knew something was very wrong.

Then the door opened and a guard was motioned inside. He appeared a moment later, hurrying down the hall. In short order, Laurie, Cardan, Valdis, and Volney were back before the door. Without taking her eyes from the closed portal, Carline reached out and clutched at Jimmy's hand. Jimmy glanced over and was startled to see her eyes brimming with tears. With dread certainty, the young man knew what was happening.

The door opened and a white-faced Nathan appeared. He looked around the room and began to speak, but halted, as if the words were too difficult to utter. At last he simply said, 'He's dead.'

Jimmy couldn't contain himself. He sprang from the bench and pushed past those before the door, not recognizing his own voice crying, 'No.' The guards were too startled to react as the young squire forced his way into Arutha's chamber. There he halted, for upon the bed was the unmistakable form of the Prince. Jimmy hurried to his side and studied the still features. He reached out to touch the Prince, but his hand halted 'scant inches from Arutha's face. Jimmy didn't need to touch him to know without doubt that the man on the bed, whose features were so familiar, was indeed dead. Jimmy lowered his head to the bed quilting, hiding his eyes as he began to weep.

4

Embarkation

Tomas awoke.

Something had called to him. He sat up and looked

about in the dark, his more than human eyes showing him each detail of his room as if it were twilight. The apartment of the Queen and her consort was small, carved from the living bole of a mighty tree. Nothing appeared amiss. For an instant he felt fear that his mad dreams of yesterday were returning, then as wakefulness fully came to him, he dismissed that fear. In this place, above all others, he was master of his powers. Still, old terrors often sprang unexpectedly to the mind.

Tomas regarded his wife. Aglaranna slept soundly. Then he was on his feet, moving to where Calis lay.

Almost two years old now, the boy slept in an alcove adjoining his parents' quarters. The little Prince of Elvandar slept soundly, his face a mask of repose. Then the call came again. And Tomas knew who called him. Instead of being reassured by the source of that call, Tomas felt a strange sense of fate. He crossed to where his white and gold armour hung. He had worn this raiment only once since the end of the Riftwar, to destroy the Black Slayers who had crossed into Elvandar. But now he knew it was time to wear battle garb again. Silently he took down the armour and carried it outside. The summer's night was heavy with fragrance as blossoms filled the air with gentle scents, mingled with the preparations of elver bakers for the next day's meals. Under the green canopy of Elvandar, Tomas dressed.

Over his undertunic and trousers he drew on the golden chain-mail coat and coif. The white tabard with the golden dragon followed. He buckled on his golden sword and picked up his white shield then donned his golden helm. For a long moment he stood again mantled in the attire of Ashen-Sugar, last of the Valheru, the Dragon Lords. A mystic legacy that crossed time bound them together, and in odd ways Tomas was as much Valheru as human. His basic nature was that of a man raised by his father and mother in the kitchen of Castle Crydee, but his powers were clearly more than human. The armour no longer held that power, it had been but a conduit fashioned by the sorcerer Macros the Black, who had conspired to have Tomas inherit the ancient powers of the Valheru. Now they resided in Tomas, but he still felt somehow lessened when he forwent the gold and white armour.

He closed his eyes and, with arts long unused, willed himself to travel to where his caller awaited. Golden light enveloped Tomas and suddenly, faster than the eye could apprehend, he flew through the trees of the elver forest. Past unsuspecting elver sentries he sped, until he reached a large clearing far to the northwest of the Queen's court. Then he again stood in corporeal form, seeking the author of the call to him. From out of the trees a black-robed man approached, one whose face was familiar to Tomas. When the short figure had reached him, the two embraced, for they had been foster brothers as children.

Tomas said, "This is a strange reunion, Pug. I knew your call like a signature, but why this magic? Why not simply come to our home?"

"We need to speak in private. I have been away."

"So Arutha reported last summer. He said you stayed upon the Tsurani world to discover some cause behind

these dark attacks by Murmandamus.'

he led Tomas to a fallen tree and they sat upon the trunk. 'I have learned things over the last year, Tomas.'

and I am certain now, beyond doubt, that what stands behind Murmandamus is what the Tsurani know as the Enemy, an ancient thing of awesome abilities. That terrible entity seeks entrance to our world and manipulates the moredhel and their allies - toward what particular ends I do not know. How a moredhel army gathering or assassins killing Arutha can aid the Enemy's entrance into our space-time is beyond my understanding.' For a moment he fell into a reflective mood. 'So many things I still don't understand, despite my learning. I almost came to an end to my searching in the library of the Assembly, save for one thing.' Looking at his boyhood friend, he seemed possessed by a deep urgency. "What I found in the library was barely a hint, but it led me to the far north of Kelewan, to a fabulous place beneath the polar ice. "I have lived for the last year in Elvardein.'

Tomas blinked in confusion. "Elvardein? That means "elvenrefuge", as Elvandar means "elvenhome"

Who ?'

'I have been studying with the eldar.'

"The eldar!" Tomas appeared even more confused.

Memories of his life as Ashen-Shugar came pouring back. The eldar were those elves most trusted by their Dragon Lord masters, those who had access to many tomes of power, pillaged from the worlds the Dragon Lords raided. Compared to their masters, they were weak. Compared to other mortals upon Midkemia, they were a race of powerful magicians. They had vanished during the Chaos Wars and were thought to have perished beside their masters. 'And they live upon the Tsurani home'world?' 'Kelewan is no more homeworld to the Tsurani than it

is to the eldar. Both races found refuge there during the Chaos Wars.' Pug paused, thinking. 'Elvardein was established as a watch post by the eldar against the need of such a time as this.

"It is much like Elvandar. Tomas, but subtly different.'

He remembered. 'When I first arrived, I was made welcome. I was taught by the eldar. But it was a different sort of teaching than any I had undergone before. One elf, called Acaila, seemed responsible for my education, though many taught me. Never once in the year I spent

under the polar ice did I ask a question. I would dream.'  
He lowered his eyes. 'it was so alien. Only you among men might understand what I mean.'

Tomas placed his hand on Pug's shoulder. "I do understand. Men were not meant for such magic.' He then smiled. "Still, we've had to learn, haven't we?"  
Pug smiled at that. 'True. Acala and the others would begin a spell and I would sit and watch. I spent weeks not understanding they were conducting lessons for me. Then one day I . . . joined in. I learned to weave spells with them. That was when my education began.' Pug smiled. "They were well prepared. They knew I was coming.'

Tomas's eyes widened. 'How?'

"Macros. It appears he told them a "likely student"

might be coming their way.'

'That indicates some connection between the war and these odd occurrences of the last year.'

'Yes.' Pug fell silent. 'i've learned three things. The first is that there is no truth to our concept of there being many paths of magic. All is magic. Only the limits of the practitioner dictate what path is followed. Second, despite my learning, I am but just begin' ning to understand all that was taught to me. For while I never asked a question, the eldar also never gave an answer.' He shivered. 'They are so different from . . . anything else. I don't know if it's the isolation. the lack of normal congress with others of their kind, or what, but Elvardein is so alien it makes Elvandar feel as familiar as the woods outside Crydee.' Pug sighed. 'it was so frustrating at times. Each day I would arise and wander the woods, waiting until an opportunity to learn presented itself. I

now know more of magic than any on this world, now that Macros is gone, but I know nothing more about what we face. Somehow I was forged as a tool, without fully understanding my purpose.'

"But you have suspicions?'

'Yes, though I will not share them, not even with you, until I am sure.' Pug stood. "I have learned much, but I need to learn more. This is certain - it is the third thing I told you I had learned - both worlds face the gravest threat since the Chaos Wars.' Pug rose, looking Tomas in the eyes. "We must be going.'  
going? Where?'

'All of that will become apparent. We are poorly

equipped to enter the struggle. We are ill informed and knowledge is slow in coming. So we must go seek knowledge. You must come' with me. Now.'

'Where?' 'To where we may learn that which may gain us

advantage: to the Oracle of Aal.'

Tomas studied Pug's face. In all the years they had known each other, Tomas had never seen the young magician so intense. Quietly Tomas said, "To 'other worlds?' "That is why I need you. Your arts are alien to mine. A

rift to Kelewan I can manage, but to travel to worlds I know only through millennia-old tomes. . .? Between the two of us, we have a chance. Will you aid me?'

"Of course. I must speak to Aglaranna. . .

'No.' Pug's tone was firm. "There are reasons. Mostly, I suspect something even more dread than what I know.' If what I suspect is true, then no one beyond the two of us may know what we undertake. To share the knowledge of this quest with another is to risk the ruination of everything. Those you seek to comfort will be destroyed. Better to let them doubt awhile.'

Tomas weighed Pug's words. One thing was certain to the boy from Crydee turned Valheru: one of the few beings in the universe worthy of complete, utter trust now spoke to him. 'I dislike this, but I will accept your caution. How shall we proceed?'

'To traverse the cosmos, perhaps even to swim the time-stream, we need a steed only you may command.'

Tomas looked away, peering into the darkness. 'it has been ages. Like all the former servants of the Valheru, those you speak of have become stronger-willed over the centuries and are unlikely to serve willingly.' He thought, remembering images of long ago. 'Still, I will try. '

Moving to the centre of the clearing, Tomas closed his eyes and raised his arms high above his head. Pug watched silently. For long moments there was no movement by either man. Then the young man in white and gold turned to face Pug. 'One answers, from a great distance, but she' comes with great speed. Soon.' Time passed, and the stars overhead moved in their course. Then in the distance the sound of mighty wings beating upon the night air could be heard. Soon the sound was a loud rush of wind and a titanic shape blotted out the stars.

Landing in the clearing was a gigantic figure, its ,descent swift and light, despite its size'. Wings spanning over a hundred feet on each side gently landed a body bulking larger than any other creature on Midkemia.

"a greater dragon settled to the earth. A head the size of a hEavy wagon lowered, until it hung just above and before

:" 'the two men.

Silver sparkles of moonlight danced over golden scales as Giant eyes of ruby colour regarded them.  
then the creature spoke. "Who dares summon me?"

The creature's mood was apparent. irritation mixed with curiosity.

Tomas answered. 'I, who was once Ashen-Shugar.'

'Thinkest thou to command me as my forebears were commanded by thine? Then know we of dragonkind have grown in power and cunning. Never willingly shall we serve again. Standest thou ready to dispute this?'

Tomas raised hands in a sign of supplication. "We seek allies, not servants. I am Tomas, who, with Dolgan the dwarf, sat the deathwatch with Rhuagh at the last. He counted me as a friend, and his gift was that which has made me again Valheru.'

The dragon considered this. Then she answered. "That song was well sung and loudly, Tomas, friend of Rhuagh. In our lore, no more marvellous thing has occurred, for when Rhuagh passed, he cursed the skies one last time, as if his youth had been restored, and he sang his death song with vigour. In it he spoke of thee and the dwarf Dolgan. All of the greater dragons listened to his song and gave thanks. For that kindness, I will listen to thy need.' "We seek places barred from us by space and time.

Upon your back I may breach such barriers.'

The dragon seemed weary of the notion of one of her kind again carrying a Valheru, despite Tomas's reassurance. "For what cause dost thou seek?"

It was Pug who spoke. "A grave danger is gathering to strike this world, and even unto dragonkind it poses a threat terrible beyond imagining.'

'There have been strange stirrings to the north,' said the dragon, 'and an ill-aspected wind blows across the land these nights.' She paused, pondering what had been said. 'Then I think it may be thou and I a bargain shall strike. For such purposes thou hast spoken shall I be willing to carry thee and thy friend. I am called Ryath.'

The dragon lowered her head, and Tomas adroitly mounted, showing Pug where to step so as not to cause the giant creature any discomfort. When both were mounted, they sat in a shallow depression where neck joined shoulder, between the wings.

Tomas said, "We are in your debt, Ryath.'

The dragon gave a mighty beat of her wings and took to the sky. As they rapidly climbed above Elvandar, Tomas's magic kept Pug and himself firmly seated on Ryath's back. The dragon spoke. "Debts of friendship are not debts. I am of 'Rhuagh's get, he was to me what in



thy world thou 'wouldst term a father, I to him a daughter. While we do not count such kinship vital as do humans, still such things have some importance. 'Come, Valheru, it is time for thee to take command.' Drawing on powers not employed for millennia, Tomas willed a passage into that place beyond space and time where his brothers and sisters had once roamed at will, visiting destruction upon worlds unnumbered. For the first time in long ages, a Dragon Lord flew between worlds.

Tomas mentally directed Ryath's course. As need came he discovered abilities not used in this life. Again he felt the persona of Ashen-Shugar within, but it was nothing like the all-consuming madness he had endured before he finally overcame the heritage of the Valheru to regain his humanity.

Tomas maintained an illusion of space about himself, Pug, and the dragon, again almost instinctively. All about them the glory of a thousand million stars illuminated the darkness. Both men knew they were not in what Pug had come to call 'true space', but were rather in that grey nothingness he had experienced when he and Macros had closed the rift between Kelewan and Midkemia. But that greyness had no substance, existing as it did between the very strands of the fabric of space and time. They could age here while appearing back at the point of departure an instant after having left. Time did not exist in this nonspace. But the human mind, no matter how gifted, had limits, and Tomas knew Pug was human, regardless of his powers, and that now was not the time to test his limits. Ryath appeared indifferent to the illusion of true space around her. Tomas and Pug sensed the dragon change directions.

The dragon's ability to navigate in this nothingness was a source of interest to Pug. He suspected Macros might have gained some insight into how to move between worlds at will from his time of study with Rhuagh years ago. Pug made a mental note to search through Macros's works back at Stardock for that information.

They emerged in normal space, thundering into existence with a loud report. Ryath beat her wings strongly, flying through angry skies, dark with rain clouds, above a rugged landscape of ancient mountains. The air held a bitter metallic tang, a hint of something foul blown along by a stinging, frigid wind. Ryath sent a thought to Tomas. This place is of an alien nature. I like it not. Aloud so that Pug might hear, Tomas answered, 'We

shall not tarry here, Ryath. And here we need fear nothing.' I have nothing to do with fear, Valheru. I simply care

not for such odd places.

Pug pointed past Tomas, who turned to follow the magician's gesture. With mental commands, Tomas directed the dragon to follow Pug's instructions. They sped between jagged peaks, a nightmare landscape of twisted rock. In the distance mighty volcanoes spewed towers of black smoke that fanned upward. Their undersides glowing orange from reflected light. The mountain slopes were aglow with flowing superheated rock. Then they came upon the city. Once-heroic walls lay rent, the gaps framed by shattered masonry. Proud towers occasionally still rose above the destruction, but mostly there was ruination. No signs of life could be seen. Over what had once been a plaza they banked, circling the heart of the city, where throngs once gathered. Now only the sound of Ryath's wings could be heard over the icy wind.

"What place is this?" asked Tomas.

'I do not know. I know this is the world of the Aal, or once was in the past. It is ancient. See the sun.'

Tomas observed an angry white spot behind blowing clouds. "It is strange."

'It is old. Once it shone like ours, brilliant and warm. Now it fades.'

Valheru lore, long dormant, returned to Tomas. 'It is near the end of its cycle. I have knowledge of these things. Sometimes they simply dwindle to nothing. Other times

.' . they explode in titanic fury. I wonder which this will be?"

'I don't know. Perhaps the oracle knows.' Pug directed Tomas toward a distant range of mountains.

Toward the mountains they sped, Ryath's powerful wings carrying them swiftly. The city had stood on the edge of tableland, once cultivated, they suspected. But nothing hinting of farms remained, save a single stretch of what seemed an aqueduct, standing isolated in the centre of the broad plain, a silent monument to a long dead people. Then Ryath began to climb as they approached the mountains. Once again they flew between mountain peaks, these old and worn by wind and

rain.

'There,' said Pug. 'We have arrived.'

Following Tomas's mental instructions, Ryath circled above a peak. Upon the south-facing rocks a clear flat place was revealed, before a large cave. There was no room for the giant dragon to land, so Tomas used his powers to levitate himself and Pug from her back. Ryath sent a message that she would fly to hunt, returning at

Tomas's call. Tomas

wished her success, but expected

the dragon to return hungry. They floated through a damp; windblown sky, so darkened by the storm there was little difference between day and night. They alighted upon the ledge before the cave. They watched Ryath speed away. Pug said, 'There is

no danger here, but we may yet travel to places of great peril. Do you think Ryath truly without fear!'

Tomas turned to Pug with a smile. "I think her so. In my dreams .of ancient days I touched the minds of her ancestors, and this dragon is to them as they were to your Fantus.' "Then it is good she joins us willingly. It would have

been difficult to persuade her otherwise.'

Tomas agreed. "I could have destroyed her, without a doubt. But bend her to my will? I think not. The days of the Valheru ruling without question are long since vanished.' Pug studied the alien landscape below the ledge. 'This

is a sad and hollow 'place. In the tomes harboured in Elvardein this world is described. It was once adorned with vast cities, homes to nations, now nothing is left."

Tomas asked quietly, "What became of those people?'

'The sun waned, weather changed. Earthquakes, famine, war. Whatever it was, it brought utter destruction.'

They turned to face the cave as a figure appeared in

the entrance, shrouded from head to foot in an allconcealing robe, only one thin arm appeared from a

sleeve. That arm ended in a gnarled old hand holding a staff. Slowly the man. or so he appeared to be.

approached, and when he stood before them, a voice as thin as an ancient wind issued from within the dark hood.

.Who seeks out the Oracle of Aal?'

Pug spoke. "I, Pug, called Milamber, magician of two worlds.

'And I, Tomas, called Ashen-Shugar, who has lived twice.'

The figure motioned for them to enter the cave. Tomas and Pug passed into a low, unlit tunnel. With a wave of

his hand, Pug caused light to appear about them. The tunnel opened into a monstrous cavern.

Tomas halted. "We were but scant yards below the peak. This cavern cannot be contained within. . .'

Pug placed his hand upon Tomas's arm. 'We are somewhere else.'

The cavern was lit by faint light issuing from the walls and ceiling, so Pug ended his own spell. Several more

figures in robes could be seen in distant corners of the cavern, but none approached.

The man who had greeted them upon the ledge walked past them, and they followed. Pug said, "What should we call you?"

The man said, "Whatever pleases you. Here we have no names, no past, no future. We are simply those who serve the oracle." He led them to a large outcropping of rock, upon which rested a strange figure. It was a young woman, or, more appropriately, a girl, perhaps no more than thirteen or fourteen, perhaps a few years older, it was difficult to judge. She was nude, covered in dirt, scratches, and her own excrement. Her long brown hair was matted with filth. Her eyes widened as they approached, and she scampered backward across the rocks, shrieking in terror. It was obvious to both men she was entirely mad. The shrieking continued while she hugged herself, then it descended the scale, changing into a mad laugh. Suddenly the girl gave the men an appraising look and began to pull at her hair, in a pitiful imitation of combing, as if she was suddenly concerned about her appearance.

Without words, the man with the staff indicated the girl. Tomas said, "This, then, is the oracle?"

The hooded figure nodded. "This is the present oracle. She will serve until her death, then another will come, as she came when she who was oracle before died. So it has always been and so will it always be."

"How do you survive on this dead world?"

"We trade. Our race has perished, but others, such as yourselves, seek us out. We abide." He pointed to the cowering girl. "She is our wealth. Ask what you will."

"And the price?" inquired Pug.

The hooded man repeated himself. "Ask what you will."

The oracle answers as she chooses, when she chooses.

She will name a price. She may ask for a sweet, a fruit, or your still-beating heart to eat. She may ask for a bauble with which to play." He indicated a pile of odd devices, cast off in the corner. "She may ask for a hundred sheep, or a hundredweight of grain or gold. You must decide if the knowledge you seek is worth the price asked. She sometimes answers without a price. And oftentimes she will not answer, no matter what is offered. Her nature is capricious.

Pug stepped up to the cowering girl. She stared at him a long moment, then smiled, absently playing with her stringy hair. Pug said, "We seek to learn the future."

The girl's eyes narrowed and suddenly there was no hint of madness within. It was as if another person instantly inhabited her. In a calm voice she answered, "To learn this, then, will you give me my price?"

'Name your price.'

'Save me.' Tomas looked at the guide. From deep within the

hood the dry voice said, 'We do not truly understand what she means. She is trapped within her own mind. It is that madness which grants her the gift of oracularity. Free her of that madness and she no longer will be the oracle. So she must have another meaning.'

Pug said, 'Save you from what?'

the girl laughed, then the calm voice returned. "If you do not understand, you cannot save me.'

The figure in robes seemed to shrug. Pug considered, then said, "I think I do understand.' He reached out, seizing the girl's head between his hands. She stiffened, as if about to scream, but Pug sent a comforting mental message. What he was about to attempt was something formerly thought to be solely the province of clerics, but his time with the eldar at Elvardein had taught him that the only real limits to magic were those of the practitioner.

Pug closed his eyes and entered madness.

Pug stood in a landscape of shifting walls, a maze of maddening colours and shapes. The horizon changed with each step and perspective was nonexistent. He looked down at his hands and watched them suddenly grow larger, until they were the size of melons, then just as rapidly shrink, until they were smaller than a child's. He looked up and could see the walls of the maze receding and approaching, seemingly at random, while their colour and pattern passed through a dozen changes. Even the ground beneath his feet was a red and white chessboard one moment, a pattern of black and grey lines the next, then large blue and green spots on red. Angry, flashing lights sought to blind him.

Pug took hold of his own perceptions. He knew he was still within the cavern and this illusion was an 'extension of his own need for a physical analogue in dealing with the girl's madness. First he stabilized himself so the strange shifting of limbs halted. To act rashly at any point could destroy the girl's brittle mind, and he had no way to judge what that would do to him, given his present contact with that mind. He might somehow be trapped in her madness, an unpleasant prospect. Over the last year Pug had learned a great deal about controlling his arts, but he had also learned their limits and he knew what he did carried some risk.

Next he stabilized the immediate area around him, changing the shifting, vibrating walls and dazzling lights. Realizing that any direction was as valid as another. he set out. Walking was also illusory, he knew, but the

illusion of movement was required for him to reach the seat of her consciousness. Like any problem, this one required a frame of reference, and it would be one the girl would provide. Pug could only react to whatever her demented mind dreamed up for him.

Abruptly he was plunged into darkness, so silent that only death could match that stillness. Then a single, odd sound came to him. A moment later, another came, from a different direction. Then a faint pulse in the air. With more rapidity, the darkness was punctuated with movement in the air and odd sounds. At last the blackness was full of pulsing noises and fetid odours. Strange breezes blew across his face and odd feathery things brushed against him, moving away too quickly for him to seize. He created light and discovered himself in a large cavern, much like the real one in which he and Tomas now stood. Nothing else stirred. Within the illusion he called out. No answer.

The landscape shuddered and shifted, and he stood upon a beautiful greensward, lined by graceful trees, too perfect to exist in reality. They formed boundaries that pointed toward an impossibly lovely palace of white marble adorned with gold and turquoise, amber and jade, opal and chalcedony, a place so startlingly wonderful that Pug could only stand in mute appreciation. The image was emotionally laden with the feeling that this was the most perfect place in the universe, a sanctuary where no trouble intruded, where one could wait out eternity in absolute contentment.

Again the landscape shifted, and he stood within the halls of a palace. From the white marble floors flecked with gold to pillars of ebony, it was the most lavish image of wealth he had ever perceived, surpassing even the palace of the Warlord in Kentosani. The ceiling was carved quartz, admitting sunlight with a rosy glow, and the walls were bedecked with rich tapestries, woven with gold and silver threads. Ebony doors with ivory trim and studdings of precious stones were common to every portal, and wherever Pug looked, he saw gold. In the centre of this splendour a white circle of light illuminated a dais, upon which stood two figures, a woman and a girl. He stepped toward them. Suddenly warriors erupted from the floor like plants springing from the ground. Each was a powerful creature of terrible aspect. One looked like a boar made human, another like a giant mantis. A third seemed a lion's head upon a man, a fourth wore the face of an elephant. Each was armed and armoured in rich metals and jewels, and they bellowed fearsomely. Pug stood quietly.

The warriors attacked and Pug remained motionless. As each nightmare creature struck, its weapon passed

through Pug, and the creatures vanished. When they were gone, Pug stepped toward the dais upon which the two figures stood.

The dais began to move away, as if upon tiny wheels or legs, picking up speed. Pug walked directly toward it, willing himself to overtake it. Soon the landscape about him was a blur in passing, and he judged the illusion of the palace must be miles in subjective size. Pug knew he could halt the fleeing dais with its two passengers, but to do so might be harmful to the girl. Any overt act of violence, even one as minor as commanding the pair of fugitives to halt, could permanently scar her.

Now the dais began a careening, banging passage through an obstacle course of rooms, and Pug was forced to dodge and move to avoid objects hurled into his path. He could also have destroyed anything that blocked his way, but the effect would have been as harmful as if he had ordered the pair to halt. No, he thought, when you enter another's reality, you observe her rules.

Then the dais halted and Pug overtook the pair. The woman stood silently, studying the approaching magician, while the girl sat at her feet. Unlike her real appearance, here the girl was beautifully clothed in a gown of soft, translucent silk. Her hair was gathered atop her head in a magnificent fashion, held by pins of silver and gold, each bearing a jewel. While it was impossible to judge how the girl looked in truth beneath the dirt, here she was a young woman of astonishing beauty.

Then the beautiful girl stood and grew, changing before his eyes to a horror of gigantic proportions. Large hairy arms sprouted from soft shoulders, while her head became that of an enraged eagle. Lightning cascaded from her ruby eyes as claws came crashing down upon Pug. He stood motionless. The claws passed harmlessly

through him, for he refused to take part in this reality.

Suddenly the monster vanished and the girl was as he had seen her in the cave, nude, filthy, and mad.

Looking at the woman, Pug said, 'You are the oracle.'

'I am.' She was regal, proud, and alien. While she looked entirely human, Pug guessed that was part of the illusion. She would be something else in truth . . . or had been when she was alive. Pug now understood.

'if I free her, what of you?'

'I must find another, and soon, or I will cease my existence. That is as it has always been and how it must be.'

'So another must succumb to this?'

'That is as it has always been.'

'if I free her, what of her?'

'She will fit as she was when brought here. She is

young and will regain her sanity.'

'Will you resist me?'

'You know I cannot. You see through the illusions.

You know these are only monsters and treasures of the mind. But before you rid her of me, understand something, magician.

'At the dawn of time, when the multitude of universes were forming, we were born, we of the Aal. When your Valheru companion and his kin raged across the heavens, we were old and wise beyond their understanding. I am the last female of my race, though that is a convenient label and not a description. Those in the cavern are males. We labour to maintain that which is our grandest heritage, the power of the oracle, for we are the husbanders of truth, the handmaidens of knowledge. It was found in ages past that I could continue to exist within the minds of others, but at the price of their own sanity. It was considered a necessary evil to corrupt a few members of lesser races in exchange for maintaining the power of the Aal. We would that it were otherwise, but it is not, for I need living minds in which to exist. Take the girl, but know that I will soon have another to reside within. She is nothing, a simple child of unknown parentage. On her homeworld she would have become at best the drudge of some peasant, at worst a whore for men's amusement. Within her mind I've given her riches beyond the dreams of the most powerful kings. What will you give her in its place?'

'Her own fate. But I think another sort of salvation was spoken of, one for you both.'

'You are perceptive, magician. The star around which this world moves is close to dying. Its erratic cycle is the cause of this planet's ruination. Already we endure an age of volcanism not seen for aeons. Within a hand's span of years this world will end in fiery death. We stand upon the third world to be called home by the Aal. But now our race has vanished into time, and we lack the

means of finding a fourth world. To answer your needs, you must be willing to answer ours.'

'Relocating you to another world is no difficulty. There are less than a dozen of you. It is agreed. Perhaps we may even find a way to prevent another's mind being sacrificed.' He inclined his head toward the figure of the cowering girl. 'That would be preferable, but we have not as yet

discovered means. Still, if you will find us a haven, I will answer your queries. A bargain has been set.'

"This, then, I propose. Upon my world I have means



to ensure a place of safekeeping for you and yours. I am counted kin to our King by adoption, and he will be favourably disposed to my request. But know that my world stands in peril, and you will share that risk.'

'That is unacceptable.'

'Then we shall have no bargain, and all will perish. For I will fail in my undertaking, and this world will vanish in 'a cloud of flaming gases.' The woman remained grave in appearance. After a

long silence she said, 'I shall amend our bargain. I will provide you with the power of the oracle, in exchange for this safe haven, when you have completed your quest.'  
~Quest?' 'I read the future,' and as we near agreement, the lines

of probability resolve themselves and the most likely future is revealed to my sight. Even as we speak, I see what you will undertake, and it is a way fraught with perils.' She stood silently for a moment, then softly said, "Now I understand what you face. I agree to these terms, as you must.'  
Pug shrugged. 'Agreed. When all has been favourably resolved, we shall carry you to a place of safety.'

"Return to the cavern.'

Pug opened his eyes. Tomas and the servants of the oracle stood as they had done when he had begun the mind contact. He asked Tomas, 'How long have I been standing here?'

'A few moments, no longer.'

Pug stepped away from the girl. She opened her eyes, and her voice was strong, untainted by madness, but carrying a hint of the alien woman's speech. 'Know that darkness unfolds and gathers, coming from where it has been confined, seeking to regain that which was lost, to the utter ruination of all you love, to the redemption of all you hold in terror. Go and find the one who knows all, who has from the first understood the truth. Only he can guide you to the final confrontation, only he.'

Tomas and Pug exchanged glances, and even as Pug spoke, he knew the answer to his question. 'Whom must I seek?'

The girl's eyes seemed to pierce his soul. Calmly she said, 'You must find Macros the Black.'

5

Crydee

Martin crouched.

He motioned for those behind to remain quiet as he listened for movement in the deep thicket. Sundown was approaching and animals should have been appearing at the edge of the pond. But something had driven away

most of the game. Martin hunted the source of that disruption. The woods were silent except for the sound of birds overhead. Then something rustled in the brush. A stag leaped forward, bounding over the edge of the clearing. Martin dodged to his right, avoiding the stags antlers and flying hooves as the frightened animal sprang past. He could hear the scurrying of his companions as they avoided being trampled by the fleeing animal. Then Martin heard a deep grumbling sound issuing from where the stag had fled. Whatever had spurred the animal into flight was approaching through the undergrowth. Martin waited, his bow ready. He watched as the bear limped into view. At a time it

should be getting fat and glossy, this animal was weak and scrawny, as thin as if it had just emerged from a long winter's sleep. Martin studied it as it lowered its head to drink from the pool. Some injury had lamed the animal, sickening it and preventing it from getting the food it needed. Two nights before the bear had mauled a farmer who had attempted to defend his milk cow. The man had died and Martin had been tracking the bear since. It was a rogue and had to be killed. The sound of horses carried through the woods, and

the bear's muzzle came up as it sniffed the air. A questioning growl escaped its throat as it rose on hind legs, followed by an angry roar as it smelled horses and men. "Damn!" said Martin as he stood, drawing his bow. He had hoped to get a cleaner shot, but the animal would turn and flee in a moment.

The arrow sped across the clearing, taking the bear below the neck in the shoulder. It was not a quick killing shot. The animal pawed at the shaft, its growls a bubbling, liquid sound. Martin came around the pond, his hunting knife out, his three companions behind;

Garret, now Huntmaster of Crydee, let fly his own arrow as Martin raced toward the bear. The second shaft took the beast in the chest, another serious but not yet fatal wound. Martin sprang at the bear while it pawed at the arrows embedded in its thick fur. The Duke of Crydee's large hunter's knife struck deep and true, taking the weak and confused animal in the throat. The bear died as it hit the ground.

Baru and Charles followed, their bows at the ready. Charles, short and bandy-legged, wore the same green leather clothing as Garret's, the uniform of a forester in Martin's service. Baru, tall and muscular, wore a plaid of green and black tartan - signifying the Iron Hills Clan of the Hadati - slung over one shoulder, leather trousers, and buckskin boots. Martin knelt over the animal. He worked at the bear's shoulder with his knife, turning his

head slightly at the sweetish, rotting stench that came up from the gangrenous wound, then he sat back, showing a bloody, pus-covered arrowhead. He said to Garret in disgust, 'When I was Huntmaster for my father, I often ignored a little poaching here and there during a lean year. But if you find the man who shot this bear, I want him hung. And if he has anything of value, give it to the farmer's widow. He murdered that farmer as much as if he had' shot him instead of the bear.'

Garret took the arrowhead and examined it. 'This arrowhead is home-cast, Your Grace. Look at this odd lias running down the side of the head. The man who cast these doesn't file the heads. He's as sloppy in his fletcherly as his hunting. If we find a quiver of arrowheads with the same flaw. we have our man. I'll pass word to the trackers.' Then the long-faced Huntmaster said, 'if Your Grace had reached that bear before I'd hit it, we might have had two murders to charge the poacher with.' His tone was disapproving.

Martin smiled. 'I had no doubt of your aim, Garret. You're the only man I know who's a better shot than I. It's one of the reasons you're Huntmaster.'

Charles said, 'And because he's the only one of your trackers who can keep up with you when you decide to Writ.'

'You do set a fast pace, Lord Martin,' agreed Baru  
"Well,' said Garret, not

entirely appeased by Martin's

answer, 'we might have had one more good shot before the bear ran.' "Might, might not. I'd rather jump it here in the

clearing, with you three coming, than try to follow it into the brush, even with three arrows in it.' He motioned toward the thicket a few yards away. 'it could get a little tight in there.' Garret looked at Charles and Baru. 'No argument as

to that, Your Grace.' He added, "Though it got a mite close out here.' A calling voice sounded a short way off. Martin stood.

'Find out who is making all that noise. It almost cost us this kill.' Charles hurried off.

Baru shook his head as he regarded the dead bear.

'The man who wounded this bear is no hunter.'

Martin looked about the woods. 'I miss this, Baru. I might even forgive that poacher a little for giving me an excuse to get away from the castle.'

Garret said, 'it's a thin excuse, my lord. By rights you should have left this to me and my trackers.'

Martin smiled. "So Fannon will insist.'

Baru said, "I understand. For almost a year I stayed with the elves and now you. I miss the hills and meadows of the Yabon Highlands." Garret said nothing. Both he and Martin understood

why the Hadati had not returned. His village had been destroyed by the moredhel chieftain Murad. And while Baru had avenged it by killing Murad, he no longer had a home. Someday he might find another Hadati village in which to settle, but for the time being he chose to wander far from home. After his wounds had healed at Elvandar, he had come to Crydee to guest for a while with Martin. Charles returned, a soldier of Crydee behind. 'The

soldier saluted and said, "Swordmaster Fannon requests you return at once, Your Grace." Martin exchanged a quick glance with Baru. 'What's afoot, I wonder?' Baru shrugged.

The soldier said, 'The Swordmaster took the liberty of sending extra mounts, Your Grace. He knew you'd left on foot.'

Martin said, "Lead on," and they followed the soldier to where others waited with mounts. As they readied themselves for the return to Castle Crydee, the Duke felt a sudden disquiet.

Fannon stood waiting for them as Martin dismounted. 'What is it, Fannon?' said Martin as he slapped at the road dust on his green leather tunic. '

'Has Your Grace forgotten Lord Miguel will arrive this afternoon?'

Martin looked at the lowering sun. 'Then he's late.'

'His ship was sighted beyond the point at Sailor's Grief an hour ago. He'll be passing Longpoint lighthouse into the harbour within the next hour.'

Martin smiled at his Swordmaster. 'You're right, of course. I had forgotten.' Almost running up the stairs, he said, 'Come and talk with me, Fannon, while I change.'

Martin hurried toward his quarters, once occupied by his father, Lord Borric. Pages had drawn a hot tub and Martin quickly stripped off his hunter's garb. He took the strongly scented soap and washing stone and said to the page, "Have plenty of cold fresh water here. This scent is something my sister might like, but it cloy's my nose." The page left to fetch more water.

"Now, Fannon, what brings the illustrious Duke of

Rodez from the other side of the Kingdom?'

Fannon sat upon a settee. 'He is simply travelling for the summer. It is not unheard of, Your Grace.'

Martin laughed. "Fannon, we're alone. You can drop the pretence. He's bringing at least one daughter of

marriageable age.' Fannon sighed. 'Two. Miranda is twenty and Inez is

fifteen. Both are said to be beauties.'

'Fifteen. Gods, man! She's a baby.' Fannon smiled ruefully. 'Two duels have been fought

already over that baby, according to my information.

Remember, these are easterners.'

Martin stretched out to soak. 'They do tend to get into politics early back there, don't they?'

'Look, Martin, like it or not, you are Duke - and brother to the King. You've never married. If you didn't live in the most remote corner of the Kingdom, you'd have had sixty social visits since your return home, not six.' Martin grimaced. 'if this turns out like the last, I'm

going to return to the forests and the bears.' The last visit had been from the Earl of Tarloff, vassal to the Duke of Ran. His daughter had been charming enough, but she tended to the flighty and' had giggled, a trait that set Martin's teeth on edge. He had left the girl with vague promises to visit Tarloff someday. 'Still,' he said, "she was a pretty enough thing.'

'Pretty has little to do with it, as you well know.

Things are still reeling in the East, even though it's approaching two years since King Rodric's death. Guy du Bas-Tyra's out there somewhere doing what only the gods know. Some of his faction still wait to see who will be named Duke of Bas-Tyra. With Caldric dead and the office of Duke of Rillanon also vacant, the East is a tower of sticks. Pull the wrong one and it ,will all come down on the King's head. Lyam is well advised by Tully to wait for sons and nephews. Then he can put more allies in office. It would do well for you not to lose sight of the facts of life for the King's family, Martin.'

'Yes, Swordmaster.' Martin said, with a regretful shake of his head. He knew Fannon was right. Once Lyam had elevated him to the position of Duke of Crydee, he had lost a great deal of his freedom, with even greater losses to come, or so it seemed.

Three pages entered with buckets of cold water.

Martin stood and let them pour the water over him.

Shivering, he wrapped himself in a' soft towel, and when the pages were gone, he said, "Fannon, what you say is obviously right, but . . . well, it's not even a year since Arutha and I returned from Moraelin. Before that . . . it was that long tour of the East. Can't I have a few months just to live quietly at home?'

'You did. Last winter.'

Martin laughed. 'Very well. But it would seem to me that there is a lot more interest in a rural duke than is required.'

Fannon shook his head. "More interest than is required in the brother to the King?"

'None of my line could claim the crown, even if three maybe soon four, others didn't stand in succession before me. Remember, I abdicated any claim for my posterity.'

'You are not a simple man, Martin. Don't play the woodsy with me. You may have said whatever you wished on the day of Lyam's coronation, but should some descendant of yours be in a position to inherit, your vows won't count a tinker's damn if some faction in the Congress of Lords wishes him King.'

Martin began to dress. 'I know, Fannon. That was meant only to keep people from opposing Lyam in my name. I may have spent most of my life in the forests, but when I dined with you, Tully, Kulgan, and Father, I kept' my ears open. I learned a lot.'

A knock came and a guard appeared at the door. "Ship flying the banner of Rodez clearing Longpoint light, Your Grace. '

Martin waved the guard out. He said to Fannon, 'I guess we'd better hurry to meet the Duke and his lovely daughters.' Finishing his dressing, he said, "I will be inspected and courted by the Duke's daughters, Fannon

but for the gods' love and patience, I hope neither Of them giggles.' Fannon nodded in sympathy as he followed Martin from the room.

Martin smiled at Duke Miguel's jest. It concerned an eastern lord Martin had met only once. The man's foibles might have been a source of humour to the eastern lords, but the joke was lost on Martin. Martin cast a glance at the Duke's daughters. Both girls were lovely: delicate features, pale complexions framed by nearly black hair, and both had large dark eyes. Miranda sat engaged in conversation with young Squire Wilfred, third son of the Baron of Carss and newly come to the court. Inez sat regarding Martin with frank appraisal. Martin felt his neck begin to colour and turned his attention back to her father. He could see why she had been the excuse for a duel between hotheaded youths. Martin didn't know a great deal about women, but he was an expert hunter and he knew a predator when he saw one. This girl might be only fifteen years of age, but she was a veteran of the eastern courts. She would find a powerful husband before too long, Martin didn't doubt. Miranda was simply another pretty lady of the court, but Inez hinted at hard edges Martin found unattractive. This girl was clearly dangerous and already experienced in twisting men to her will. Martin determined to keep that uppermost in mind.

Supper had been quiet, as was Martin's usual custom, but tomorrow there would be jugglers and singers, for a travelling band of minstrels was in the area. Martin had little affection for formal banquets after his eastern tour but some sort of show was in order. Then a page hurried into the room, skirting the tables to reach Housecarl Samuel's side. He spoke softly, and the Housecarl came to Martin's chair. Leaning down, he said, 'Pigeons just arrived from Ylith, Your Grace. Eight of them.'

Martin understood. For so many birds to have been used the message would be urgent. It was usual to employ only two or three against the possibility of a bird not finishing the dangerous flight over the Grey Tower Mountains. It took weeks to send them back by cart or ship, so they were used sparingly. Martin rose. 'if Your Grace will excuse me a moment?' he said to the Duke of Rodez. 'Ladies?' He bowed to the two sisters, then followed the page out of the hall.

In the antechamber of the keep, he found the Hawkmaster, in charge of the hawk mews and the pigeon coop, standing with the small parchments. He handed them to Martin and withdrew. Martin saw the tiny message slips were sealed, with the royal crest of Krondor drawn on the roll of paper about them, indicating only the Duke was to open them. Martin said, 'I'll read these in my council chamber.'

Alone in his council room, Martin saw that the slips had been numbered one and two. Four pairs. The message had been sent four times to ensure it arrived intact. Martin unfolded one of the slips marked one, then his eyes widened as he fumbled to open another. The message was duplicated. He then read a number two, and tears came unbidden to his eyes.

Long minutes passed as Martin opened every slip, hoping to find something different, something to tell him he had misunderstood. For a long time, he could only sit staring at the papers before him as a cold sickness visited the pit of his stomach. Finally a knock came at the door, and he said weakly, 'Yes?'

The door opened and Fannon entered. 'You've been gone near an hour -' He stopped when he saw Martin's drawn expression and red eyes. "What is it?'

Martin could only wave his hand at the scraps. Fannon

read them, then half staggered backward to sit in a chair. A shaking hand covered his face for a long minute. Both men were silent. At last he said, "How could this be?'

'I don't know. The message only says an assassin.'

Martin let his gaze wander around the room, every stone

in the wall and piece of furniture associated with his father, Lord Borric. And of his family, the most like their father had been Arutha. Martin loved them all. but Arutha had been a mirror of Martin in many ways. They had shared a certain way of seeing things and had endured much together: the siege of the castle during the Riftwar while Lyam had been absent with their father, the long dangerous quest to Moraelin to find Silverthorn. No, in Arutha Martin had discovered his closest friend in many ways. Elver-taught, Martin knew the inevitability of death, but he was mortal and felt an empty place appear within himself. He regained his composure as he stood. "I had best inform Duke Miguel. His visit is to be short. We leave for Krondor tomorrow."

Martin looked up as Fannon reentered the room. 'it will take all night and morning to get ready, but the captain says your ship will be able to leave on the afternoon tide.' Martin motioned for him to take a chair and waited a

long moment before speaking. "How can it be, Fannon?" The Swordmaster said, 'I can't answer that, Martin. Fannon was thoughtful a moment, then softly said, 'You know I share your grief. We all do. He, and Lyam, were like my own sons.'

"I know." "But there are other matters that cannot be put off."

'Such as?' "I'm old, Martin. I suddenly feel the weight of ages

upon me. News of Arutha's death . . . makes me again feel my own mortality. I wish to retire.'

Martin rubbed his chin as he thought. Fannon was past seventy now, and while his mental capacity was undiminished, he lacked the physical stamina required of the Duke's second-in-command. "I understand, Fannon. When I return from Rillanon -"

Fannon interrupted. 'No, that's too long, Martin. You will be gone several months. I need a named successor now, so I can begin to ensure he is capable when I leave office. If Cardan were still here, I'd have no doubt as to a smooth transition, but with Arutha stealing him away' - the old man's eyes filled with tears - 'making him Knight-Marshal of Krondor, well. . .'

Martin said, 'I understand. Who did you have in mind?' The question was asked absently, as Martin struggled to keep his mind calm.

'Several of the sergeants might serve, but we've no one of Cardan's capabilities. No, I had Charles in mind.' Martin gave a weak smile. "I thought you didn't trust him."

Fannon sighed. 'That was a long time back, and we



were fighting a war. He's shown his worth a hundred times since then, and I don't think there's a man in the castle more fearless. Besides, he was a Tsurani officer, about equal to a knight-lieutenant. He knows warcraft and tactics. He has often spent hours speaking with me about the differences between Tsurani warfare and our own. I know this: once he learns something, he doesn't forget. he's a clever man and worth a dozen lesser men. Besides, the soldiers respect him and will follow him.' Martin said, 'I'll consider it and decide tonight. What else!"

Fannon was silent for a time, as if speaking came with difficulty. 'Martin, you and I have never been close. When your father called you to serve I felt, as did others that 'there was something strange about you. You were always aloof, and you had those odd elvish ways. Now I

know that part of the mystery was the truth of your relationship to Borric. I doubted you in some ways, Martin. I'm sorry to admit that . . . But what I'm trying to say is . . . you honour your father.'

Martin took a deep breath. "Thank you, Fannon.'

'I say this to ensure you understand why I say this next. This visit from Duke Miguel was only an irritation before, now it is an issue of weight. You must speak to Father Tully when you reach Rillanon, and let him find you a wife.'

Martin threw back his head and laughed, a bitter, angry laugh. 'What jest, Fannon? My brother is dead and you want me to look for a wife?'

Fannon was unflinching before Martin's rising anger. 'You are no longer the Huntmaster of Crydee, Martin. Then no one cared should you ever wed and father sons. Now you are sole brother to the King. The East is still in turmoil. There is no duke in Bas-Tyra, Rillanon, or Krondor. Now there is no Prince in Krondor.' Fannon's voice became thick with fatigue and emotion. 'Lyam sitS upon a perilous throne should Bas-Tyra venture back to the Kingdom from exile. With only Arutha's two babes in the succession now, Lyam needs alliances. That is what I mean. Tully will know which noble houses need to be secured to the King's cause by marriage. If it's Miguel's little hellcat Inez, or even Tarloffs giggler, 'marry her, Martin, for Lyam's sake and the sake of the Kingdom.' Martin stifled his anger. Fannon had pressed a sore

point with him, even if the old Swordmaster was correct. In all ways, Martin was a solitary man, sharing little with any man save for his brothers. And he had never done well with the company of women. Now he was being told

he must wed a stranger for the sake of his brother's political health. But he knew there was wisdom in Fannon's words. Should the traitorous Guy du Bas-Tyra be plotting still, Lyam's crown was not secure. Arutha's death showed all too clearly how mortal rulers were. Finally Martin said, 'I'll think about that as well, Fannon.'

The old Swordmaster rose slowly. Reaching the door, he turned. 'I know you hide it well, Martin, but the pain is there. I'm sorry if it seems I add to it, but what I said needed to be said.' Martin could only nod.

Fannon left and Martin sat alone in his chamber, the sole moving thing the shadows cast by the guttering torches in the wall sconces.

Martin stood impatiently watching the scurrying activity in preparation for his and the Duke of Rodez's departure. The Duke had invited Martin to accompany them aboard his own ship, but Martin had managed a barely adequate refusal. Only the obvious stress of dealing with Arutha's death had allowed him to rebuff the Duke without serious insult.

Duke Miguel and his daughters appeared from the keep, dressed for travel. The girls were poorly hiding their irritation at having to resume travel so soon. It would be a full two weeks or more before they were again in Krondor. Then, as a member of the peerage, their father would be hurrying to Rillanon for Arutha's burial and state funeral.

Duke Miguel, a slight man of fine manners and dress, said, 'It is tragic we must quit your wonderful home under such grim circumstances, Your Grace. If I may, I would gladly extend the hospitality of my own home to you should Your Grace wish to rest awhile after your brother's funeral. Rodez is but a short journey from the capital.'

Martin's first impulse was to beg off but, keeping Fannon's words of the night before in mind, he said, "Should time and circumstances permit, Your Grace, I'll be most happy to visit you. Thank you.' He cast a glance at the two daughters and determined then and there that

should Tully advise an alliance between Crydee and Rodez, it would be the quiet Miranda he would court. Inez was simply too much trouble gathered together in one place. The Duke and his daughters rode out in a carriage

toward the harbour. Martin thought back to when his father had been Duke. No one in Crydee had need of a carriage, which served poorly on the dirt roads of the Duchy, often turned to thick mud by the coastal rains.

But with the increasing number of visitors to the West, Martin had ordered one built. It seemed the eastern ladies fared poorly on horseback while in court costume. He thought of Carline's riding like a man during the Riftwar, in tight-fitting trousers and tunic, racing with Squire Roland, to the utter horror of her governess. Martin sighed. Neither of Miguel's girls would ever ride like that. Martin wondered if there was a woman anywhere who shared his need for rough living. Perhaps the best he could hope for would be a woman who would accept that need in him and not complain over his long absences while he hunted or visited his friends in Elvandar.

Martin's musing was interrupted by a soldier accompanying the Hawkmaster, who held out another small parchment. "This just arrived, your Grace."

Martin took the parchment. Upon it was the crest of Salador. Martin waited until the Masterhawk had left to open it. Most likely it was a personal message from Carline. He opened it and read. He read again, then thoughtfully put the parchment in his belt pouch. After a long moment of reflection, he spoke to a soldier at post before the keep. "Fetch Swordmaster Fannon."

Within minutes the Swordmaster was in the Duke's presence. Martin said, "I've thought it over and I agree with you. I'll offer the position of Swordmaster to Charles."

"Good," said Fannon. "I expect he will agree."

"Then after I'm gone, Fannon, begin at once to instruct Charles in his office."

Fannon said, "Yes, Your Grace." He started to turn away but turned back toward Martin. "Your Grace?" Martin halted as he had just begun to walk back to the keep. "Yes?"

"Are you all right?"

Martin said, "Fine, Fannon. I've just received a note from Lauric informing me that Carline and Anita are well. Continue as you were." Without another word he returned to the keep, passing through the large doors. Fannon hesitated before leaving. He was surprised at Martin's tone and manner. There was something odd in the way he looked as he left.

Baru quietly faced Charles. Both men sat upon the floor, their legs crossed. A small gong rested to the left of Charles and a censer burned between them, filling the air with sweet pungency. Four candles illuminated the room. The only furnishings were a mat upon the floor, which Charles preferred to a bed, a small wooden chest, and a

pile of cushions. Both men wore simple robes. Each had a sword across his knees. Baru waited while Charles kept his eyes focused upon some unseen point between them. Then the Tsurani said, "What is the Way?"

Baru answered. 'The Way consists of discharging loyal service to one's master, and of deep fidelity in associations with comrades. The Way, with consideration for one's place upon the Wheel, consists of placing duty above all.'

Charles gave a single curt nod. "in the matter of duty, the code of the warrior is absolute. Duty above all. Unto death.'

"This is understood.'

'What, then, is the nature of duty?' Baru spoke softly. "There is duty to one's lord. There

is duty to one's clan and family. There is duty to one's work, which provides an understanding of duty to one's self. In sum they become the duty that is never satisfactorily discharged, even through the toil of a lifetime, the duty to attempt a perfect existence, to attain a higher place on the Wheel.'

Charles nodded once. "This is so.' He picked up a small felt hammer and rang a tiny gong. 'Listen.' Baru closed his eyes in meditation, listening to the sound as it faded, diminishing, becoming fainter. When the sound was fully gone, Charles said, 'Find where the sound ends and silence begins. Then exist in that moment, for there will you find your secret centre of being, the perfect place of peace within yourself. And recall the most ancient lesson of the Tsurani: duty is the weight of all things, as heavy as a burden can become, while death is nothing, lighter than air.'

The door opened and Martin slipped in. Both Baru and Charles began to rise, but Martin waved them back. He knelt between them, his eyes fixed on the censer upon the floor. "Pardon the interruption.'

'No interruption, Your Grace,' answered Charles.

Baru said, 'For years I fought the Tsurani and found them honourable foemen. Now I learn more of them.

Charles has allowed me to take instruction in the Code of the Warrior, in the fashion of his people.'

Martin did not appear surprised. 'Have you learned much?'

'That they are like us,' said Baru with a faint smile. 'I know little of such things, but I suspect we are as two saplings from the same root. They follow the Way and understand the Wheel as do the Hadati. They understand honour and duty as do the Hadati. We who live in Yabon had taken much from the Kingdom, the names of our gods, and most of our language, but there is much of the old ways we Hadati kept. The Tsurani belief in the Way

is much like our own. This is strange, for until the coming of the Tsurani, no others we met shared our beliefs.'

Martin looked at Charles. The Tsurani shrugged slightly. "Perhaps we only find the same' truth on both worlds. Who can say?"

Martin said, 'That sounds the sort of thing to take up with Tully and Kulgan.' He was quiet a moment, then said, 'Charles, will you accept the position of Swordmaster?'

The Tsurani blinked, the only sign of surprise. 'You honour me, Your Grace. Yes.'

'Good, I am pleased. Fannon will begin your instruction after I'm gone.' Martin looked up at the door, then

lowered his voice. 'I want you both to do me a service.'

Charles didn't hesitate in agreeing to serve. Baru studied Martin closely. They had forged a bond on the trip to Moraelin with Arutha. Baru had almost died there, but fate had spared him. Baru knew his fortune was intertwined in some way with those who had quested for Silverthorn. Something lay hidden behind the Duke's eyes, but Baru would not question him. He would learn what it was in time. Finally he said, "As will I.'

Martin sat between the men. He began to speak.

Martin gathered his cloak about him. The afternoon breeze was chilly, blowing down from the north. He looked sternward as Crydee disappeared behind the headlands of Sailor's Grief. With a nod to the ship's captain, he descended the companionway from the quarterdeck. Entering the captain's cabin, he locked the door behind. The man who waited there was one of Fannon's soldiers, named Stefan, equal in height and general build to the Duke, and wearing a tunic and trousers of the same colour as Martin's. He had been sneaked aboard in the early hours before dawn, dressed as a common sailor. Martin took off his cloak and handed it to the man. 'Don't come up on deck except after night until you're well past Queg. Should anything force the ship ashore at Carss, Tulan, or the Free Cities, I don't want sailors speaking of my disappearance.'

'Yes, Your Grace.'

'When you get to Krondor, there'll be a carriage waiting for you, I expect. I don't know how long you can continue the masquerade. Most of the nobles who've met me will already be en route to Rillanon, and we're enough alike to casual observation that most of the servants won't know you.' Martin studied his bogus counterpart. "If you keep your mouth closed, you might pass as me all the way to Rillanon.'

Stefan looked disquieted by the prospect of a long

siege of playing nobility but said only, "I will try, Your Grace.' The ship rocked as the captain ordered a change of

course. Martin said, "That's the first warning.' Quickly he Stripped off his boots, tunic, and trousers, until all he wore was his underbreeches. '

The captain's cabin had a single, hinged window, which opened with a protest. martin hung his legs over the edge. From above he heard the captain's angry voice. "You're coming too close to the shore!. hard a starboard!' A confused-sounding helmsman answered, "Aye, captain, hard a starboard.' Martin said, "Good fortune be with you, Stefan.'

'And with you, Your Grace.'

Martin dropped from the captain's cabin. The captain had warned him of the danger of hitting the large tiller so Martin easily avoided it. The captain had brought him as close to shore as was safe, then turned out for deeper waters. Martin saw the beach less than a mile off. He was an indifferent swimmer but a powerful man and he set out for the shore in a series of easy strokes. The rolling swells made it unlikely anyone in the rigging would notice the man who was falling far behind them.

A short time later, Martin staggered up onto the beach, breathing hard. He looked about, locating landmarks. The action of the currents had carried him farther south than he had wished. Taking a deep breath, he turned up the beach and began to run.

After less than ten minutes, three riders came over a low bluff, moving rapidly down to the sand. Upon seeing them, Martin halted. Garret was the first to dismount, while Charles led an extra horse. Baru kept an alert eye out for sign of anyone in the area. Garret handed Martin a bundle of clothing. The run up the beach had dried Martin off and he dressed quickly. Behind the saddle of the extra horse hung an oilskin-covered longbow. As Martin dressed. he said, 'Did anyone see you leave?'

Charles answered, 'Garret was already gone from the castle with your horse before dawn, and I simply instructed the guards I was riding a short way with Baru as he returned to Yabon. No comment was made by anyone.'

'Good. As we learned the last time we faced Murmandamus's agents, secrecy is paramount.' Martin mounted and said, 'Thank you for your help. Charles you and Garret had best return quickly, before anyone becomes suspicious.'

Charles said, 'Whatever fate brings, Your Grace, may it also bring honour.'

Garret only said. 'Good fortune, Your Grace.'

The four riders were off, two returning up the coast

road to Crydee, two heading away from the sea. toward the forest, bound for the northeast.

The forests were quiet, but still punctuated by the normal bird calls and small animal noises that indicated

things were as they should be. Martin and Baru had ridden hard for days, pushing their horses to the limit of their endurance. they had crossed the river Crydee hours earlier.

From behind a tree a figure emerged, dressed in a green tunic and brown leather breeches. With a wave he said, 'Well met, Martin Longbow, Baru Serpent slayer.'

Martin recognized the elf, though he didn't know him well. 'Greetings, Tarlen. We come seeking counsel with the Queen.' "Then travel on, for you and Baru are always welcome

in her court. I must stand watch here. Things have become somewhat strained since last you guested.' Martin recognized the tone of the elf's words. Something had the elves distressed, but Tarlen wouldn't speak of it. Martin would need to see the Queen and Tomas to discover what it was. He wondered. The last time the elves had seemed this disturbed over something, Tomas had been at the height of his madness. Martin spurred his horse forward. Later the two riders approached the heart of the elver

forests, Elvandar, ancient home to the elves. The tree City was awash with light, for the sun was high overhead, crowning the massive trees with brilliance. Leaves of green and gold, red and white, silver and bronze sparkled across the canopy of Elvandar.

As they dismounted, an elf approached. 'We shall care for your mounts, Lord Martin. Her Majesty wishes you to come at once.' Martin and Baru hurried up the stairs cut from the

bole of a tree into the city of the elves. Across high arches on the backs of branches and upward they climbed. At last they reached the large platform that was the centre of Elvandar, the court of the Queen.

Aglaranna sat quietly upon her throne, her senior adviser, Tathar, at her side. Around the court the elder Spellweavers sat, the Queen's council. The throne beside her was empty. Her expression was unreadable to most, but Martin understood elver ways and saw the strain in her eyes. Still, she was beautiful and regal and her smile a beacon of warmth as she said, 'Welcome, Lord Martin, Welcome, Baru of the Hadati.'

Both men bowed, then the Queen said, 'Come, let us talk.' She rose and led them to a chamber, accompanied by Tathar. Inside she turned and bade them sit. Wine

and food were brought but ignored as Martin said, 'Something is wrong.' It was not a question. Aglaranna's expression of concern deepened. Martin had not seen her this troubled since the Riftwar. "Tomas is gone . ' Martin blinked. 'Where?'

'We do not know. He vanished in the night, a few days after the Midsummer's Festival. Tathar answered.

Occasionally he would wander off to be with his own thoughts, but never for more than a day. When he did not appear after two days, trackers were dispatched. There were no tracks from Elvandar, though that is not surprising. He has other means of travelling. But in a glade to the north we found marks from his boots. There were signs of another man there, sandal prints in the earth."

Martin said, 'Tomas went to meet with someone, then didn't return.'

'There was a third set of tracks,' said the Elf Queen. 'A dragon's. Once again the Valheru flies upon the back of a dragon.'

Martin sat back, understanding. 'You fear a return of the madness?'

'No,' said Tathar instantly. "Tomas is free of that and, if anything, is stronger than he suspects. No, we fear Tomas's need to depart in such a manner without word. We fear the presence of another.'

Martin's eyes widened. 'The sandals?'

'You know what power is needed to enter our forests undetected. Only one man before has had the ability: Macros the Black.' Martin pondered. 'Perhaps he's not the only one. I

understand Pug to have stayed upon the Tsurani world to study the problem of Murmandamus and what he called the Enemy. Perhaps he has returned.'

'Which sorcerous master it is proves of little import,' said Tathar. It was Baru who spoke next. 'What is important is that two men of vast powers are about upon a mission of mystery, at a time when it seems troubles have returned from the north.' Aglaranna said, 'Yes.' She said to Martin, 'rumours

have reached us of the death of one who was close to you.' In the elver way she avoided naming the dead. "There are things I may not speak of, lady, even to one as highly regarded as you. I have a duty.'

'Then,' asked Tathar, "may I ask where you are bound and what brings you here?'

"It is time to go north again,' said Martin, 'to finish what was started last year.'

'it is well you came this way,' said Tathar. 'We have



seen signs from the coast to the east of massive goblin migrations northward. Also the moredhel are bold with their scouting along the edge of our forests. They seem intent on discovering if any of our warriors pass beyond our normal boundaries. There have been sightings of bands of renegade humans riding northward, close to the boundary with Stone Mountain, as well. The gwali have fled south into the Green Heart, as if fearing something approaching. And for months we have been visited by some ill-aspected wind of evil, which carries some mystic quality, as if power were being drawn to the north. We are concerned over many things.'

Baru and Martin exchanged glances. 'Things move at swift pace,' said the Hadati.

Further conversation was halted when a shout went up from below and an elf appeared at the Queen's elbow.

"Majesty, come, a Returning.'

Aglaranna said, 'Come, Martin, Baru, witness something miraculous.'

Tathar followed his Queen, turning to say, 'if it is indeed a true Returning and not a ruse.'

The Queen and Tathar were joined by her other advisers as they hurried down to the forest floor. When they reached ground level, they were greeted by several warriors who surrounded a moredhel. The dark elf looked somehow odd to Martin, showing a calmness beyond what was normal for the dark elves.

The moredhel saw the Queen and bowed before her, lowering his head. Softly he said, "Lady, I have returned.'

The Queen nodded to Tathar. He and others of the Spellweavers gathered about the moredhel. Martin could feel a strange sensation as if the air had suddenly become charged, and as if music could almost be heard. He knew the Spellweavers were working magic. Then Tathar said, 'He has 'returned!'

Aglaranna said, "What is your name?'

'Morandis, Majesty.'

"No more. You are Lorren.'

Martin had learned the year before that there was no difference between the branches of elvenkind, separated only by the power of the Dark Path, that which bound the moredhel to a life of murderous hatred toward all not of their kind. But there was a subtle difference in attitude, stance, and manner between the two. The moredhel rose and the elves surrounding him helped him remove his tunic, the grey of the moredhel forest clans. Martin had lived with elves all his life and

fought the moredhel many times and could recognize the difference. But now his senses were confounded. One moment the moredhel seemed odd, somehow different from what they had expected, then suddenly he was a moredhel no longer. He was given a brown tunic and, miraculously, Martin saw an elf there. He had the dark hair and eyes common to the moredhel, but then so did a few other elves, just as an occasional moredhel was blond and blue-eyed. He was an elf!

Tathar observed Martin's reaction to the change and said, "occasionally one of our lost brothers breaks away from the Dark Path. If his kin do not discover the change and kill him before he reaches us, we welcome his return to his home. It is a cause for rejoicing." Martin and Baru watched as every elf in the area came to embrace Lorren in turn, welcoming him home. "in the past, the moredhel have attempted to send spies, but we can always tell the true from the false. This one has truly returned to his people." Baru said, "Does it happen often?"

"Of all who abide in Elvandar, I am eldest," said

Tathar. "I have seen only seven such Returnings before this one." He was silent for a time. "Someday we hope we shall redeem all our brothers in this fashion, when the power of the Dark Path is at last broken."

Aglaranna turned to Martin. "Come, we shall be celebrating."

"We may not, Majesty," answered Martin. "We must be away to meet with others."

"May we know your plans?"

"It is simple," answered the Duke of Crydee. "We shall find Murmandamus."

"And," added Baru without expression, "we shall kill him."

6

## Leavetaking

Jimmy sat quietly.

He absently studied the list in his hand, attempting to keep his mind on the matter before him. But he was unable to concentrate on the task. The duty roster of squires for that afternoon's cortege was done, or as done as it was likely to be. Jimmy felt an emptiness inside, and the need to decide which squire was posted where seemed trivial in the extreme.

For two weeks Jimmy had been fighting the feeling that he was caught up in some horrible dream, one from which he could not shake himself. Nothing in his

existence so far had affected him as deeply as Arutha's murder, and he still couldn't face his emotions. He had slept long each night, as if sleep were an escape, and when awake he was nervous and anxious to be doing something as if being busy would keep him from dealing with his grief. He kept it hidden away, to be confronted later.

Jimmy sighed. One thing the young man knew, this funeral was taking a hellishly long time getting organized. Lauric and Volney had postponed the departure of the funeral procession twice now. The bier had been placed aboard its carriage within two days after Arutha's death, awaiting his body. Tradition held the Prince's cortege should have started for Rillanon and his ancestral vault within three days after his death, but Anita had taken days returning from her mother's estates, then a few more days in recovering enough to depart, then they needed to wait for other nobles who were arriving, and the palace was in disorder and so on and so on. Still, Jimmy knew he wouldn't begin to get over this tragedy until after Arutha was carried away. Knowing he lay in the temporary vault Nathan had prepared, somewhere not too far from where the squire now sat, was just too much for Jimmy. He rubbed his eyes, lowering his head, as once more the threat of tears was forced down. In his short life, Jimmy had met only one man who had touched him deeply. Arutha should have been one of the last men in the world to care about the fate of a boy thief, but he had. He had proved a friend, and more. He and Anita had been the closest thing to family Jimmy had ever known. A knock upon the door brought his head up and he

saw Locklear standing before the entrance. Jimmy waved him in and the younger boy sat down on the other side of the writing desk. Jimmy tossed the parchment at him.

'Here, locky, you do this.'

Locklear quickly scanned the list, and took quill from holder. "it's almost ready, except Paul is down with the flux and the chirurgeon wants him in bed for the day. He needs rest. This is a mess. I'd better recopy it.'

Jimmy nodded absently. Through the blanket of grey sorrow that wrapped his thoughts, an irritant was gently scratching. Something had been nagging at the corner of the young man's mind for three days now. Everyone in the palace was still in shock at Arutha's death, but there was an odd note here and there, every so often someone said or did something that was somehow discordant. Jimmy couldn't put his finger on what that difference was, or even if it was important. With a mental shrug he pushed aside his worry. Different people reacted differently to tragedy. Some, like Volney and Cardan, threw

themselves into their work. Others, like Carline, went off to cope with their grief in a private way. Duke Laurie was a lot like Jimmy. He just put his grief aside to be faced at some other time. Suddenly Jimmy understood one reason for his feeling of oddness about the palace. Laurie had been just about running the palace from the time Arutha lay stricken until three days ago. Now he was almost continuously absent.

Looking at Locklear as the younger boy wrote on the duty roster, Jimmy said, 'locky, have you seen Duke Laurie about lately?'

Keeping his eyes on his work, Locklear said, 'This morning, very early. I was in charge of delivering meals to the visiting nobles for breakfast, and I saw him riding out the gate.' His head came up, a strange expression on his face. "it was the postern gate.'

"Why would he leave by the postern gate?' Jimmy

wondered.

Locklear shrugged and returned to the roster. 'Because that's the direction he was heading?'

Jimmy thought. What reason did the Duke of Salador have riding toward the Poor Quarter on the morning of the Prince's funeral procession? Jimmy sighed. 'i'm becoming suspicious in my old age.'

Locklear laughed, the first happy sound in the palace in days. Then, as if he had sinned, he looked up guiltily. Jimmy stood. "Done?'

Locklear handed over the parchment. "Finished.'

"Good,' said Jimmy. 'Come along, deLacy will not

show his usual forbearance if we're late.'

They hurried to where the squires were assembling.

The usual jostling play and laughing whispers were absent, for the occasion was solemn. DeLacy arrived a few minutes after Jimmy and Locklear were in place and without preamble said, 'The roster.' Jimmy gave it to him and he glanced over it. 'Good, though either your penmanship is improving or you've acquired an assistant.'

There was a slight shuffle among the boys, but no open mirthfulness. DeLacy said, 'i'm changing one assignment, though. Harold and Bryce will stand as coach attendants to the Princesses Alicia and Anita. James and Locklear will remain to assist the Steward of the Royal Household here at the palace. '

Jimmy was stunned. He and Locklear would not be in the cortege to the gates. They would stand idly by in case there was some minor problem the steward judged required a squire's presence.

DeLacy absently read the other assignments aloud, then dismissed the boys. Locklear and Jimmy exchanged

glances, and Jimmy overtook the departing Master of Ceremonies. 'Sir. . .' Jimmy began.

DeLacy turned on Jimmy. "if it's about the assignments, there will be no' debate.'

Jimmy's face flushed angrily. "But I was the Prince's Squire!" he answered hotly. In an unusually bold moment, Locklear blurted, "And

I was Squire to Her Highness.'

DeLacy looked at the younger boy in astonishment. 'Well, sort of.' he amended. 'That is of no consequence,' said deLacy. 'i have my

orders. You must follow yours. That will be all.' Jimmy began to protest again, but was cut off by the old Master. 'i said that would be all, squire.'

Jimmy turned and began walking away. Locklear fell in beside him. "i don't know what's going on here," said Jimmy, 'but I intend to find out. Come on.'

Jimmy and Locklear hurried along, glancing about. An order from any senior member of the court would prevent this unexpected visit, so they took pains to avoid the scrutiny of anyone likely to find work for them. The funeral cortege would depart the palace in less than two hours, so there were ample tasks remaining for two squires. Once begun, there would be a slow parade through the city, a stop at the temple square, where public prayers would be said, then the long journey to Rillanon and the tomb of Arutha's ancestors. Once the funeral party was outside the city, the squires would return to the palace. But Jimmy and Locklear were being denied even that small part in the procession.

Jimmy approached the Princess's door and said to the guard without, 'if Her Highness can spare a moment?' The guard's eyebrows rose, but he was not in a position to question even as minor a member of the court as a squire, so he would simply pass the message inside. As the guard pushed open the door, Jimmy thought he heard something out of place, a sound that ended before he could apprehend its nature. Jimmy tried to puzzle out what he had just heard, but the guard's return diverted his attention. A moment later, he and Locklear were .admitted.

Carline sat with Anita, near a window, awaiting the summons to attend the funeral. Their heads were close together and they were speaking softly. Princess Mother Alicia hovered at her daughter's shoulder. All three were 'dressed in black. Jimmy came and bowed, Locklear at his side. "i'm sorry to intrude, Highness," he said softly. Anita smiled at him. 'You're never an intrusion, Jimmy. What is it?'

Suddenly feeling it was petty to be concerned over his

exclusion from the funeral, Jimmy said, 'A small thing actually. Someone ordered me to remain at the palace today, and I wondered . . . well, did you ask for me to be kept here?'

A glance passed from Carline to Anita, and the Princess of Krondor said, 'No, I didn't, Jimmy.' Her tone was thoughtful. "But perhaps Earl Volney did. You are Senior Squire and should stay in your office, or at least I'm sure that's what the Earl decided.'

Jimmy studied her expression. A discordant note was sounding here. Princess Anita had returned from her mother's estate displaying the grief expected. But soon after, there had been a subtle change in her. Further conversation was interrupted by a baby's cry, quickly followed by another. Anita rose. 'it's never just one of them,' she said, with affection clearly showing. Carline smiled at that, then suddenly her expression turned sombre. Jimmy said, 'We have intruded, Highness. I am sorry

to have troubled you over so petty a matter.'

Locklear followed Jimmy outside. Moving out of the guard's earshot, Jimmy said, "Did I miss something in there, locky?' Locklear turned and regarded the door for a moment.

"Something's . . . odd. It's like we're being kept out of the way.' Jimmy thought a minute. He now understood what

had arrested his attention outside the door, just before they had been admitted. The sound that intruded had been the Princesses' voices, or rather the quality of those voices: chatty, lightly bantering. Jimmy said, 'i'm beginning to think you're right. Come along. We don't have much time.'

'Time for what?' 'You'll see.' Jimmy hurried off down the corridor and

the younger boy had to scramble to catch up.

Cardan and Volney were hurrying toward the courtyard, accompanied by four guards, when the boys intercepted them. The Earl hardly spared a glance as he said, 'Aren't you two supposed to be in the courtyard.'

'No, sir,' answered Jimmy. 'We've drawn steward' duty.' Cardan seemed mildly surprised at that, but all Volney

said was "Then I expect you should hurry along in case you're needed there. We must begin the procession.'

'Sir,' said Jimmy, "did you order us to remain?'

Volney waved off the question. "Duke Laurie has been attending to those details with Master deLacy.' He turned his attention away from the boys as he and cardan walked off.

Jimmy and Locklear halted as the Earl and Marshal vanished around a corner, the boot heels of their escorts clacking noisily on the stones. 'I think I'm beginning to understand,' said Jimmy. He grabbed Locklear by the arm. "Come on.'

With a half frustrated note in his voice, Locklear said, 'Where?'

'You'll see,' came the answer, as Jimmy almost ran. Locklear hurried after, mimicking, 'You'll see. You'll see. See what, damn it!'

Two guards stood at post. One said, "And where are you young gentlemen off to?'

"Port Authority,' said Jimmy testily, handing over a

quickly penned order. "The steward can't find some ship manifest, and he's in a fury to get a copy.' Jimmy had been about to investigate something and was rankled by the need to run this errand. It also seemed an odd time for the steward to become obsessed with the need for a manifest.

The guard who had examined the paper said, "Just a minute.' He signalled to another soldier near the guard officer's room by the main entrance to the palace. The guard hurried over and the first sentry said, 'Can you spare a bit of time to run these lads down to the port office and back? They need to fetch something for the steward.'

The guard looked indifferent. There and back would take less than an hour. He nodded and the three were off.

Twenty minutes later, Jimmy stood in the Port Authority office dealing with a minor functionary as everyone else was off to watch the cortege leave the city.

The man grumbled as he thumbed through a stack of paper work, looking for a copy of the last manifest of goods delivered to the royal docks. While he fumbled, Jimmy cast a glance at another paper hanging on the wall of the office for all to look at. It was this week's schedules of departures. Something caught his eye and he crossed over to look. Locklear followed him. 'What?' Jimmy pointed. 'interesting.'

Locklear looked at the notation and said, "Why?'

'I'm not sure,' answered Jimmy, pitching his voice lower~ "but think a minute about some of the things going on at the palace. We get held back from the procession, then we ask the Princess about it. We're out of her quarters less than ten minutes when we're sent on this useless errand. You tell me, doesn't it seem like we're being kept out of the way? Something's . . . odd.'

"That's what I said earlier,' said Locklear impatiently.

The clerk found and handed over the requested paper, and the guard escorted the boys back to the palace. Running past the gate guards, Jimmy and Locklear waved absently, then headed toward the steward's office. Once inside the palace, they appeared at the office as the steward, Baron Giles, was leaving. "There you are," he said in an accusatory tone. "I thought I was going to have to send guards to ferret you out of wherever you were lazing away the day." Jimmy and Locklear exchanged glances. The steward seemed to have forgotten about the manifest entirely. Jimmy handed it to him. "What's this?" He examined the paper. "oh yes," he remarked, tossing the paper upon his desk. "I'll deal with that later. I must be off to see the procession depart the palace. You will stay here. Should any emergency arise, one of you will remain in this office while the other will come and find me. Once the bier has left the gate, I will return."

"Do you anticipate any problems, sir," asked Jimmy. Walking past the boys, the steward said, "of course not, but it always pays to be prepared. I shall return in a short time."

After he left, Locklear turned to face Jimmy. "All right. What's going on? And don't you dare say ""You'll see."" "

"Things are not what they seem to be. Come on."

Jimmy and Locklear dashed up the stairs. Reaching a window overlooking the court, they quietly observed the preparations below. The funeral procession was assembling, the rolling bier moving into place, escorted by a hand-picked company of Arutha's Household Guard. It was pulled by a matched set of six black horses, each bedecked with black plumes and hand-led by a groom, dressed in black. The soldiers fell in on each side of the bier.

A group of eight men-at-arms came from within the palace, bearing the casket containing Arutha. They moved to a rolling scaffolding that allowed them to raise the casket high atop the bier. Slowly, almost reverently, they hoisted the Prince of Krondor up onto the black shrouded structure.

Jimmy and Locklear looked down into the casket and, for the first time, could clearly see the Prince. Tradition held the procession should move out with the casket open so the populace could behold their ruler a last time. It would be closed outside the city gates, never to be opened again, save once more in the privacy of the family vault below the King's palace in Rillanon, where Arutha's family would bid him a final farewell.



Jimmy felt his throat tightening. He swallowed hard, moving the stubborn lump. He saw Arutha had been laid out in his favourite garb, his brown velvet tunic and russet leggings. A green jerkin had been added, though he had rarely worn such. His favourite rapier was clasped between his hands, and his head remained uncovered. He seemed asleep. As he was moved out of view, Jimmy noticed the fine satin lounging slippers on the Prince's feet. Then a groom came forward, leading Arutha's

horse, which would follow behind the bier, riderless. It was a magnificent grey stallion, which tossed its head high and struggled against the groom. Another ran out and between the two of them they managed to quiet the fractious mount.

Jimmy's eyes narrowed. Locklear turned in time to notice the odd expression. "What?"

'Damn me, but something's odd. Come on, I want to see a thing or two.'

'Where?'

But Jimmy was off, saying merely, "hurry, we only have a few minutes!" as he ran down the stairs. Locklear chased after, groaning silently.

Jimmy hid in the shadow near the stable. "Look," he said as he pushed Locklear forward. Locklear made a show of strolling past the stable entrance as the last of the honour guard's mounts were being led out. Nearly the entire garrison would be walking behind the Prince's bier, but once outside the city, a full company of Royal Lancers would act as escort all the way to Salador.

"Hey, you boy. Watch what you're about!" Locklear

had to jump aside as a groom ran from the stable between two horses, holding their bridles. He had almost run Locklear down. Locklear ambled back and ducked around the corner beside Jimmy.

'I don't know what you expected to find, but no, it's

not there.'

'That's what I expected to find. Come on,' ordered Jimmy as he dashed back toward the central palace.

(Where?'

'You'll see.'

Locklear stared daggers into Jimmy's back as they ran across the marshalling yard.

Jimmy and Locklear dashed up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. Reaching the window overlooking the courtyard, they gasped for breath. The run to and from the stable had taken ten minutes, and the cortege

was about to leave the palace. Jimmy watched closely. Carriages rolled up to the steps of the palace and pages ran forward to hold open the doors. By tradition only the royal family, by blood and marriage, would ride. All others would walk behind Arutha's bier as a sign of respect. Princess Anita and Alicia walked down and entered the first carriage, while Carline and Laurie hurried to the second, the Duke nearly skipping he was walking so fast. He almost leaped into the carriage after Carline, rapidly pulling the curtains over the windows on his side.

Jimmy regarded Locklear, who stood with an open expression of curiosity on his face over Laurie's behaviour. Seeing no need to comment to the other youngster, Jimmy remained silent.

Cardan took his place before the procession, his shoulders hung with a heavy black mantle. He signalled, and a single drummer began a slow tattoo upon a muffled drum. Without spoken order, the procession set out on the fourth beat of the drum. The soldiers moved in silent lockstep, while the carriages rolled forward. Suddenly the grey stallion bucked and an extra groom again had to hold the animal in place. Jimmy shook his head. He had an old familiar feeling: all the pieces of some odd puzzle were about to fall into place. Then slowly a smile of understanding spread across his face.

Locklear observed his friend's change of expression. "What?" "now I know what Laurie's been up to. I know what's

going on.' With a friendly slap to Locklear's shoulder, he said, 'Come on, we've got a lot to do and little time to do it. '

Jimmy led Locklear through the secret tunnel, the guttering torch sending flickering shadows dancing in every direction. Both squires were dressed for travel and carried weapons, packs, and bedrolls. 'You sure they'll not have someone at the exit?' asked Locklear for the fifth time. Impatiently Jimmy said, 'I told you: this is the one exit

I never showed anyone, not even the Prince or Laurie.' As if trying to explain away this transgression of omission, he added, "Some old habits are harder to break than others.' They had gone about their duties all afternoon, after

the squires had all retired, they had stolen away to where they had hastily stashed their travel packs. Now it was close to midnight. Reaching a stone door, Jimmy pulled a lever and they

both heard a click. Jimmy put out the torch and put his shoulder to the door. After several hard shoves, the

protesting door moved, age having made it reluctant. They crawled through a small door - disguised as stonework in the base of the wall beyond the Prince's marshalling yard, on the street closest to the palace. Less than half a block up the road stood the postern gate, with its attendant sentries. Jimmy tried to push the door shut, but it refused to budge. He signalled to Locklear, and the younger boy shoved in concert. It held, then with a sudden release slammed shut with an audible crash. From up by the gate came an inquiring voice. 'Here now who's out there? Stand and be identified.'

Without hesitation Jimmy was off, Locklear half a step behind. Neither boy looked back to see if chase was being offered, but kept their heads down as they dashed along the cobblestones.

Soon they were lost in the warren of streets between the Poor Quarter and the docks. Jimmy halted to gain his bearings, then pointed. "That way. We've got to hurry. The Raven leaves on the midnight tide.'

Both boys hurried through the night. Soon they were passing shuttered buildings near the waterfront. From the docks came the sound of men shouting orders as a ship made ready to depart.

'it's pulling out,' yelled Locklear.

Jimmy didn't answer, only picking up his pace. Both squires reached the end of the dock as the last line was cast off, and with desperate leaps they reached the side of the ship as it moved away from the quay. Rough hands pulled them over and in a moment they stood upon the deck.

'Here now, what is this?' came an inquiring voice, and a moment later, Aaron Cook stood before them. "Well, then, Jimmy the Hand, are you so anxious for a sea voyage you'd break your neck to come aboard?'

Jimmy grinned. 'Hello, Aaron. I need to speak to Hull.'

The pock-faced man scowled at the squires. That's Captain Hull to any aboard the Royal Raven, Prince's Squire or not. I'll see if the captain has a moment.'

Shortly the squires stood before the captain, who fixed them with a baleful expression as he studied them with 'his one good eye. 'Deserting your post, eh?'

'Trevor,' Jimmy began, but as Cook scowled, he amended, "Captain. We need to travel to Sarth. And we saw from the ships' list in the Port Authority you're beginning your northward patrol tonight.'

'Well now, you may think you need to travel up the

coast, Jimmy the Hand, but you've not rank enough to come aboard my ship with no more than a by-your-leave, and you didn't even have that. And despite the public

notice - for the benefit of spies, you should know - my course is westerly, for I've Durbin slave runners reported lying at sea ambush for hapless Kingdom traders, and there's always Quegan galleys nosing about. No, you'll be ashore with the pilot once we've cleared the outer breakwater, unless you've a better reason than simply wanting free transportation.' The former smuggler's expression revealed that while he might feel affection for Jimmy, he'd brook no nonsense aboard his ship. Jimmy said, "If I might have a word with you in private.' Hull exchanged glances with Cook, then shrugged.

Jimmy spent a full five minutes whispering with the old captain. Then suddenly Hull laughed, a genuinely amused sound. 'I'll be scuppered!' A moment later he approached Aaron Cook. 'Have these lads taken below. As soon as we clear harbour, I want full sail. Make course for Sarth.' Cook hesitated a minute, then turned to a sailor and ordered him to take the boys below. When they were gone, and the harbour pilot over the side in his longboat, the first mate called all hands aloft and ordered all sails out and set a northern course. He cast a glance rearward where Captain Hull stood next to the helmsman, but the captain only smiled to himself.

Jimmy and Locklear stood at rail's edge, waiting. When the boat was ready, they boarded. Trevor Hull came to stand beside them. "Sure you don't want to put back to Sarth?' Jimmy shook his head. 'I'd rather not be seen arriving

aboard a Royal Customs ship. Attracts too much notice. Besides, there's a village near here where we can buy horses. There's a good place not a day's ride beyond there where we all camped last time. We can watch any who pass. It'll be easier to spot them there.' 'As long as they haven't passed already.' "They only left a day before we did,' and we sailed

every night while they had to sleep. We're in front of them.'

"Well then, young lads, I'll wish you the protection of

Kilian, who in her kinder moments watches over sailors and other reckless sorts, and of Banath, who does the same for thieves, gamblers, and fools.' In more serious tones, he said, 'Take care, boys.' Then he signalled the boat lowered.

It was still gloomy, as the coast fog had not been pierced yet by the sun. The longboat was turned toward the beach and the rowers pulled hard. Swiftly they

headed in, until the bow of the longboat scraped sand, and Jimmy and Locklear were ashore.

The innkeeper hadn't wished to sell his horses at first, but Jimmy's serious attitude, his posture of authority, and the way he wore his sword, coupled with ample gold, changed his mind. By the time the sun had cleared the forest to the east of the village of Longroad, the two young men were mounted, well provisioned, and on their way up the road between Sarth and Questor's View. By midday they were in place, at a narrow point in the road. To the east an upthrust of land, covered with heavy foliage, prevented anyone from passing, while to the west, the land dropped away quickly to the beach. From their vantage point, Jimmy and Locklear could see any travellers coming up the road or the beach. They built a small fire against the damp and settled in to wait.

Twice in the three days that followed, they had been menaced. The first time had been by a band of

unemployed bravos, mercenary guards, on their way south from Questor's View. But that band had been discouraged by the determination of the two young men and the probability they had nothing to steal besides the two horses. One man tried to take a horse, but Jimmy's speed with a rapier dissuaded him. They left rather than spill blood over suchh trivial booty.

The second encounter had been considerably riskier, as both youngsters had stood side by side with weapons drawn, protecting their horses from three disreputable-looking bandits. Had the road agents had more numbers, Jimmy was certain the youths would have been killed, but the men had fled at the sound of approaching riders, which turned into a small patrol from the garrison at Questor's View.

The soldiers had questioned Jimmy and Locklear and had accepted their tale. They were travelling as sons of a minor squire, who was due to meet with them soon at this location. The boys and their father would then continue on south to Krondor, to follow after the Prince's funeral procession. The sergeant in charge of the patrol had wished them safe passage.

Late in the afternoon, the fourth day after arriving, Jimmy spotted three riders coming down the beach. He watched for a long moment, then said, "There they are!" Jimmy and Locklear quickly mounted and rode down the gap in the cliff to the beach. They halted, their mounts pawing the sand, as they waited for the riders to approach. The three riders came into view, slowed, then

approached warily. They looked tired and dirty, most likely mercenaries from their weapons and armour. All wore beards, though the two dark-haired men's were short and newly growing. The first rider swore an oath at the sight of the two youngsters. The second shook his head in disbelief.

The third rider edged his horse past the first two and came to halt before the boys. "How did you. . .?" Locklear sat with his mouth open, in stunned silence. In everything Jimmy had told him, this was the one thing the Senior Squire had not mentioned. Jimmy grinned. 'it's a bit of a story. We've a little camp up on the headland if you want to rest, though it's by the road.' The man scratched at his two-week-old beard. "Might as well. There's little point in travelling much more today.'

Jimmy's grin broadened. 'I must say, you're the liveliest-looking corpse I've ever seen, and I've seen a few.'

Arutha returned the grin. Turning to Laurie and Roald, he said, 'Come on, let's rest the horses and find out how these young rogues figured us out.'

The fire seemed to burn cheerfully as the sun disappeared over the ocean. They lay around the campfire, except Roald, who stood with a view of the road. it was a lot of little things,' said Jimmy. 'The Princesses both seemed more worried than grief-stricken. When we were kept away from the cortege, I became suspicious.'

Locklear added, 'it was something I said.'

Jimmy shot Locklear a hard glance, indicating it was his story. 'Yes, it was. He mentioned we were being kept away. Now .I know why. I'd have tumbled to the bogus Duke in the carriage in a minute. Then I'd have known he was heading north to finish with Murmandamus.'

Laurie said, 'Which is why you were kept away.'

Roald added, 'Which was the whole idea.'

Jimmy looked stung. 'You could have trusted me.'

Arutha looked caught halfway between amusement and irritation. it wasn't an issue of trust, Jimmy. I didn't want this. I didn't want you along. ' With a mock groan he said, 'Now I've two of you.'

Locklear looked at Jimmy with an expression of concern, but Jimmy's tone put him at ease. Well, even princes have an occasional lapse of judgment. Just remember what sort of fix you'd have been in if I hadn't sussed out that trap up at Moraelin.'

Arutha nodded in surrender. 'So you knew something strange was going on, then figured out Laurie and Roald were going north, but what gave away I was still alive?' Jimmy laughed. 'First, the grey stallion was used in the

procession, and your sorrel was missing from the stable. You never liked the grey, I remember you saying.' Arutha nodded. 'He's too fractious. What else?' 'It hit me while we watched the body go past. If you

were going to be buried in your favourite togs, you'd have your favourite boots on.' He pointed to the pair the Prince wore. 'But there~ were only slippers on his feet. That's because the boots the assassin wore into the palace were covered in sewer muck and blood. Most likely whoever dressed the body went looking for another pair rather than clean the assassin's boots and couldn't find any, or they didn't fit, so they just put the slippers on. When I saw that I figured it out. You didn't have the assassin's body burned, only the heart. Nathan must have put a spell on it to keep it fresh.'

'I didn't know what I was going to do with it, but thought it might come in useful. Then we had that attempt in the temple. That assassin's dagger was no sham' - he absently rubbed a sore side - 'but it was not a serious wound.' Laurie said, "Half Another inch higher and two to the

right and he'd have had a real enough funeral after all.' 'We kept things at a low boil the first night, Nathan, Cardan, Volney, Laurie, and I, while we figured out what to do,' Arutha said. "I decided to play dead. Volney held up the funeral procession until the local nobles arrived, which gave me time to heal enough to ride. I wanted to slip out of the city without anyone being the wiser. If Murmandamus thinks me dead, he'll stop looking for me. With this' - he held out the talisman given to him by the Ishopian Abbot - "he'll not find me with magic means. I'm hoping to make him act prematurely. '

Laurie said, 'How'd you boys get here? You couldn't have passed us along the road.'

'I got Trevor Hull to bring us here,' replied Jimmy.

Arutha said, "You told him?"

'But only him. Not even Cook knows you're alive.'

Roald said, 'Still too damn many for a secret.'

Locklear said, "But, I mean, everyone who knows can be trusted . . . sir.'

"That's not the issue,' said Laurie. 'Carline and Anita

know, as did Cardan, Volney, and Nathan. But even deLacy and Valdis were kept ignorant. The King won't know until Carline tells him in private when they reach Rillanon. Only those know.'

'What of Martin?' asked Jimmy.

'Laurie sent a message to him. He'll meet us in Ylith answered Arutha.

"That's risky," said Jimmy.

Laurie said, "No one but a few of us could understand the message. All it said was "The Northerner. Come fastest." It was signed "Arthur." He'll understand no one is to know Arutha lives.'

Jimmy revealed his appreciation. 'Only those of us here know the Northerner is the inn in Ylith where .martin wrestled with that Longly character.'

'Who's Arthur?' asked Locklear.

"His Highness," said Roald. 'it's the name he used when last he travelled.'

"And I used it when I came to Krondor with Martin and Amos. '

Jimmy got a thoughtful look. 'This is the second time We ride north, and it's the second time I wish Amos Trask was with us.' Arutha said, 'Well, he is not. Let's turn in. We've a

long ride ahead, and I must decide what to do with you two young rogues.' Jimmy wrapped his bedroll about him, as did the

others, while Roald maintained the first watch. Then for the first time in weeks, Jimmy dropped quickly off to sleep' free of grief.

7

## Mysteries

Ryath thundered into familiar skies.

Above the forests of the Kingdom she wheeled. From her came the thought, I must hunt. The dragon preferred mind-speech while flying, though she spoke aloud upon the ground. Tomas looked back at Pug, who answered. (it is far to

Macros's island. Nearly a thousand miles.'

Tomas smiled. (We can be there more quickly than you imagine.'

"How far can Ryath fly?'

"Around the globe of this world without landing, though I think she'd judge there was no good reason to do so. Also, you've not seen a tenth of her speed.'

'Good,' answered Pug. "Then, when we've landed upon Sorcerer's Isle.'

Tomas requested more forbearance from the dragon, who grudgingly agreed. Climbing high in the blue skies of Midkemia, Ryath followed Pug's directions, over the peaks of mountains, toward the Bitter Sea. With mighty beats of her wings she climbed to where she could soar. Soon the landscape below sped away, and Pug wondered



what the limits of the dragon's speed might be. They were moving more rapidly than a running horse and seemed to be picking up speed. There was a component of magic in Ryath's flying ability, for while the dragon appeared to soar, she was in fact increasing speed without a single beat of her wings. Faster and faster they flew. They were comfortable, owing to Tomas's magic, he protected them from wind and cold, though Pug was nearly dizzy from exhilaration. The forests of the Far Coast gave way to the peaks of the Grey Towers and then they were speeding over the lands of the Free Cities of Natal. Next they were flying over the waters of the Bitter Sea, highlights of silver and green glittering on the deep blue, and ships plying the summer trade routes from Queg to the Free Cities looked but a child's toys. As they sped high above the island kingdom of Queg, they could see the capital and outlying villages, again looking like playthings from this height. Far below them winged shapes flew in formation over the edge of land, and from the dragon came a mirthful chuckle. Know them, dost thou, Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches?

Tomas said, "They are not what they once were."

Pug said, "What is it?"

Tomas pointed downward. "Those are descendants of the giant eagles I hunted - Ashen-Shugar hunted - ages past. I flew them as lesser men fly falcons. Those ancient birds were intelligent after a fashion."

The highland men train these and ride them as others do horses. They are a fallen breed.

Tomas seemed irritated. "Like so much else, they' are -but a shadow of what they once were."

With humour, the dragon answered, still there are those of us who are more, Valheru.

%there was much about him no one could ever fathom. . rv n 5. ' c as he undcN~ his friend,

Tomas was unique in all the world and had burdens upon his soul no other being could comprehend. In a vague way Pug could understand how these descendants of the once proud eagles Ashen-Shugar had hunted could pain Tomas, but he chose not to comment. Whatever disquiet Tomas experienced, it was his alone.

A short time later another island came into view, tiny compared to the nation of Queg, but still large enough to house a sizeable population. But Pug knew only a few had ever' abided there, for it was Sorcerer's Isle, home of Macros the Black.

As they sped over the northwestern edge of the island, they dipped lower, clearing a range of hills, then flew above a small vale. Pug said, "it can't be!"

Tomas said, "What?"

'There was an odd . . . place here before. A home with

outbuildings. It's where I met Macros. Kulgan, Cardan, Arutha, and Meecham were all there, too.'

They swooped over tall trees. Tomas said, "These oaks and bristlecone pines did not grow in even the near dozen years since you first met the sorcerer, Pug. They are ancient in aspect.'

Pug said, 'Another of Macros's mysteries. Pray, then, the castle's still there.'

Ryath cleared another line of hills, putting them in sight of the only visible structure on the island, a lone castle. They banked over the beach where Pug and his companions had first landed upon the island, years before, and the dragon rapidly descended, landing upon a trail above the beach. Bidding her companions goodbye, she launched herself into the air, preparing to hunt. Tomas, watching as Ryath vanished into the azure sky, said, "I had forgotten what it was to ride a dragon.'

He appeared thoughtful as he faced Pug. 'When you asked me to accompany you, I was again fearful of awakening dormant spirits within.' He tapped his chest.

'I thought here Ashen-Shugar waited, only needing an excuse to rise up and overwhelm me again.' Pug studied Tomas's face. His friend was masking his emotions well, but Pug could still see them there, powerful and deep.

'But I know now there is no difference between Ashen-Shugar and Tomas. I am both.' He looked down for a moment, reminding Pug of how the boy had once looked when making excuses for some transgression before his mother. "I feel as if I've both gained and lost.'

Pug nodded. 'We'll never again be the boys we once were, Tomas. But we've become so much more than we dreamed. Still, few things of worth are ever simple. Or easy.'

Tomas stared out to sea. "I was thinking of my parents. I've not visited them since the end of the war.-I am not who they once knew. '

Pug understood. "It will be hard for them, but they are good people and will accept the change in you. They will wish to see their grandchild.'

Tomas sighed, then he laughed, part in pleasure, part in bitterness. "Calis is different from what they would have expected, but then so am I. No, I do not fear to see them again.' He turned and looked at Pug. Softly he said, 'No, I fear I may never see them again.'

Pug thought of his own wife, Katala. and all the others at Stardock. He could only reach out and grip Tomas's arm for a long, thoughtful moment. Despite ' their strengths and abilities, talents unrivalled on this world, they were mortal and, even more than Tomas, Pug knew the dreadful nature of what they faced. And Pug held deeper suspicions and darker fears in private. The silence

of the eldar during his training, their presence on Kelewan, and the insights gained from studying with them all pointed at possibilities Pug fervently hoped would prove false. There was a conclusion here he would not speak of until he had no other choice. Pushing aside his disquiet, he said, 'Come, we must seek Gathis.'

They stood overlooking the beach, at a point where two trails divided from one. Pug knew that one led to the castle, the other toward the small vale where the strange house and outbuildings the sorcerer had called Villa Beats had stood, the place he had first met Macros. Pug now wished when he and the others had returned to claim the legacy of Macros, the heart of the Academy at Stardock's library, they had visited the complex. For those buildings to have vanished, to be replaced by trees of ancient aspect . . . it was, as he had said, one more of the many mysteries surrounding Macros the Black. They followed the path toward the castle.

The castle stood upon a table of land, separated from the rest of the island by a deep ravine that fell away to the ocean. The crashing of waves through the passage echoed beneath them as they slowly crossed the lowered drawbridge. The castle was fashioned from unfamiliar dark stone, and around the great arch above the portcullis odd-looking creatures of stone perched, regarding Pug and Tomas with stony gaze as they passed below. The outside of the castle looked much as it had the last time pug had been here, but once inside the castle, it was evident that everything else had changed. Upon the last visit, the grounds and castle had appeared well tended, but now the stones at the base of the building exhibited weeds growing from cracks, and the grounds were littered with bird droppings. They hurried to the large doors to the central keep, which hung open. As they pushed them wide, the screeching of hinges testified to their rusty condition. Pug led his friend through the long hall and up the tower steps, until he reached the door into Macros's study. The last time he had been here, it had taken both a spell and answering a question in Tsurani to open the door, but now a simple push sufficed. The room was empty.

Pug turned and they hurried down the steps until they reached the great hall of the castle. In frustration, Pug cried, 'Hello, the castle,' His voice echoed hollowly off the stones.

Tomas said, "It appears everyone is gone."

"I don't understand. When we last spoke, Gathis said

he would abide here, awaiting Macros's return and keeping his house in order. I only knew him briefly, but I would warrant he would keep this castle as we saw it

last.

Tomas said, 'Until he was no longer able. It may be someone had reason to visit the island. Pirates or Quegan raiders?' 'Or agents of Murmandamus?'' Pug visibly sagged. "I

had hoped we would discover some clue from' Gathis to begin our search for Macros.' Pug looked about and spied a stone bench before the wall. Sitting down, he said, "We don't even know if Macros lives yet. How are we to find him?'

Tomas stood in front of his friend, towering over him. He placed one boot upon the bench and leaned forward, crossed arms resting upon his knee. "It is also possible this castle is deserted because Macros has already returned and left again.'

Pug looked up. 'Perhaps. There is a spell . . . a spell of the Lesser Path.'

Tomas said, 'As I understood such things -"

Pug interrupted. "I have learned many things at Elvardein. Let me try this.' He closed his eyes and incanted. his words soft and low as he directed his mind into a path still strange to it as often as not. Suddenly his eyes snapped open. "There's some sort of ensorcellment upon this castle. The stones - they're not right.'

Tomas looked at Pug: a question unspoken in his eyes.

Pug rose and touched the stones. "I used a . spell that should have gleaned information from the very walls.

Whatever occurs near an object leaves faint traces, energies that impact it. With skill, they can be read as you or I would read a scribe's writings. It is difficult but possible. But these stones show nothing. It is as if no living being had ever passed through this hall.' Suddenly Pug turned toward the doors. 'Come!' he commanded.

Tomas fell in beside his friend as Pug walked out to the heart of the courtyard. There he halted, raising his hands above his head. Tomas could feel mighty energies forming about them as Pug gathered power. Then Pug closed his eyes and spoke, rapidly and in a tongue both odd and familiar to Tomas. Then Pug's eyes opened and he said, "Let the truth be revealed!"

As if a ripple moved outward, with Pug at the centre, Tomas found his vision shiNing. The very air shimmered and on one side there was the abandoned castle, but as the ripple passed, the court was revealed as well tended. The circle widened rapidly as the illusion was dispelled, and suddenly Tomas discovered they were in an orderly courtyard. Nearby a strange creature was carrying a bundle of firewood. He halted, surprise evident upon his nonhuman face, and dropped the bundle.

Tomas had begun to draw his sword, but Pug said, 'No,' placing a restraining hand upon his arm.

"But it's a mountain troll!"

'Gathis told us Macros employed many servants, judging each upon its own merits.'

The startled creature, broad-shouldered, long-fanged, and fearsome in appearance, turned and ran in a stooping, apelike fashion toward a door in the outer wall. Another creature, nothing either man had seen upon this world, exited the stable and halted. It was only three feet tall and had a muzzle like a bear, but its fur was redgold. Seeing the two humans regarding it, it set aside the broom it carried and slowly backed into the stable door. Pug watched until it was out of sight. Cupping his hands about his mouth, Pug called, "Gathis!"

Almost instantly, the doors to the great hall opened and a well dressed goblin-like creature appeared. Taller than a goblin, he possessed the thick ridges above the eyes and large nose of the goblin tribe, but his features were somehow more noble, his movements more graceful. Attired in blue singlet and leggings, with a yellow doublet and black boots, he hurried down the steps and bowed before the two men. With a sibilance to his speech, he said, 'Welcome, Master Pug.' He studied Tomas. 'This, then, would be Master Tomas?' Tomas and Pug exchanged glances. Then Pug said, "We seek your master.'

Gathis seemed to look distressed. 'That may prove a bit of a problem, Master Pug. As best as I can ascertain, Macros no longer exists.'

Pug sipped at his wine. Gathis had brought them to a chamber where refreshments were provided. The steward of the castle refused to sit, standing opposite the two men as they listened to his story.

'So, as I said when last we spoke, Master Pug, between the Black One and myself there is an understanding. I can sense his . . . state of being? Somehow I know he is always out there, somewhere. About a month after you left, I awoke one night suddenly feeling the absence of that . . . contact. It was most disturbing.'

"Then Macros is dead," said Tomas.

Gathis sighed, in a very human way. "I am afraid so. If not, he is somewhere so alien and remote it amounts to little difference.'

Pug considered in silence, while Tomas said, 'Then who fashioned that illusion!'

'My master. I activated it as soon as you and your companions left the castle after your last visit. Without the presence of Macros the Black to ensure our safety,

he felt the need to provide us with "protective colouration," in a manner of speaking. Twice now bold pirates have combed the island for booty. They find nothing.' Pug's head suddenly came up. 'Then the villa still exists?' 'Yes, Master Pug. It was also hidden by the illusion.'

Gathis appeared disturbed. "I must confess that while I am no expert in such matters, I would have thought the illusion spell beyond your ability to banish.' Again he sighed. "Now I worry at its absence once you've left.' Pug waved away the remark. "I will reestablish it before we leave.' Something nagged at Pug's mind, a strange image of speaking with Macros in the villa. 'When I asked Macros if he lived in the villa, he said, "No, though I once did, long ago." ' He looked at

Gathis. 'Did he have a study, such as the one in the tower, at the villa?'

Gathis said, 'Yes, ages ago, before I came to this place.'

Pug stood. "We must go there, now.'

Gathis led them down the path into the vale. The red tile roofs were as Pug had remembered. Tomas said, "This is a strange place, though it seems pleasing enough in aspect. With fair weather, it would be a comfortable home.' "So my master thought, once,' said Gathis. 'But he was

gone for a long time, so he told me. And when he returned, the villa was deserted, those who had lived with him gone without explanation. At first he searched for his companions, but soon despaired of ever knowing their fate. Then he feared for the safety of his books and other works as well as the lives of the servants he planned to bring here, so he built the castle. And took other measures,' he added with a chuckle.

(The legend of Macros the Black.'

"Terror of evil magic serves oftentimes better than stout

castle walls, Master Pug. The difficulties were not trivial: shrouding this rather sunny island in gloomy clouds and keeping that infernal blue light flashing in the high tower each time a ship approached. It was something of a nuisance.'

They entered the courtyard of the villa, surrounded by only a low wall. Pug paused to regard the fountain, where three dolphins rose upon a pedestal, and said, "I fashioned the pattern in my transport room after this.' Gathis led him toward the central building, and suddenly Pug understood. There were neither connecting walkways nor roofs covering them, but this villa matched his

own upon Kelewan in building size and placement. The pattern was identical. Pug halted, looking shaken.

Tomas said, 'What is it?'

"It seems Macros had his hand in many things far more subtle than we had known. I built my home upon Kelewan in the image of this one without knowing I had done so. I had no reason to, save it seemed the way to build it. Now I don't think I had much choice. Come, I will show you where the study lay.' He led them without error to the room that matched the location of his own study. Instead of the sliding cloth-covered doors of Kelewan, they faced a single door of wood, but Gathis nodded.

Pug opened the door and stepped inside. The room was identical in size and shape. A dust-covered writing table and chair rested where Pug had placed his low writing table and cushions in the matching room. Pug laughed, shaking his head in appreciation and wonder. 'The sorcerer had many tricks.' He moved to a small fireplace. Pulling upon a stone, he revealed a hidden nook. "I had such a place built into my own hearth, never understood why. I had no reason to use it.' Within that nook a rolled parchment lay. Pug withdrew it and inspected it. A single ribbon without seal tied the scroll.

He unrolled it and read, his face becoming animated.

'Oh, you clever man!' he said. Looking at Tomas and Gathis, he explained. "This is written in Tsurani. Even if the spell of illusion was broken, and someone stumbled across this room, and found the nook and the parchment, there was almost no chance of them being able to read this.' He looked back at the parchment and began to read aloud. " "Pug, by reading this, know I am most likely dead~ But if not, I am somewhere beyond the normal boundaries of space and time. In either case I am unable to provide you with the aid you seek. You have discovered something of the nature of the Enemy and know it imperils both Kelewan and Midkemia. Seek me first in the Halls of the Dead. If I am not there, then you know I live. If I am alive, I will be captive in a place difficult to find. Then you will make the choice, either to seek to learn more of the Enemy on your own, a most dangerous course in the extreme but one that may succeed, or to search for me. Whatever you do, know I wish you the blessings of the gods. Macros." '

Pug put away the scroll. "I had hoped for more.'

Gathis said, 'My master was a man of power, but even he had his limits. As stated in his last missive to you, he could not pierce the veil of time once he entered the rift with you. From that point on, time was as opaque to him as to other men. He could only speculate.'

Tomas said, 'Then we must away to the Halls of the

Dead.

Pug said, 'But where are they to be found?'

(Attend,' said Gathis. 'Beyond the Endless Sea lies the southern continent, called Novindus by men. From north to south a range of mountains runs, called in the language of those men the Ratn'gari, which means "Pavilion of the Gods".

Upon the two tallest peaks, the Pillars of Heaven, stands the Celestial City, or so men say, the home of the gods. Below those peaks, in the foothills stands the Necropolis, the City of the Dead Gods. The highest-placed temple, one that rests against the base of the mountains, honours the four lost gods. There you will find a tunnel into the heart of the Celestial Mountains. This is the entrance to the Halls of the Dead.'

Pug considered. 'We shall sleep the night, then call Ryath and cross the Endless Sea.'

Tomas turned without comment, beginning the trek back to Macros's castle. There was no discussion. They had no choice. The sorcerer had been nothing if not ,thorough.

Ryath banked. For hours they had flown faster than Pug had thought possible. The Endless Sea had rolled below, a vast ocean of seemingly uncrossable size.' But the dragon had not hesitated an instant in accepting their destination. Now, hours later, they were flying over a continent on the other side of the world. They had moved from east to west as well as crossing to the southern hemisphere, so they had gained some daylight. In late afternoon, they had sighted the southern continent, Novindus. First they had crossed a great sand wasteland, bounded by high cliffs running for hundreds of miles along the seacoast. Any who landed from a ship on that northern coast would have days of travel and a dangerous climb before drinking water could be found. Then the dragon had cut across grasslands. Far below, hundreds of strange wagons surrounded by herds of cattle, sheep, and horses had been moving from north to south. Some nomadic people, a nation of herdsmen, was following the tracks of its ancestors, oblivious to the dragon high overhead.

Then they saw the first city. A mighty river, reminding Pug of the Gagajin on Kelewan, cut across the grasslands. On the southern shore a city had arisen, and farther south farmland could be seen. Far to the southwest, in the haze of evening, a range of mountains rose: the Pavilion of the Gods.



Ryath began to descend, and they soon approached the centre of the range, a pair of peaks that rose high above those surrounding, disappearing into clouds, the Pillars of Heaven. At the base of the mountains, deep forests hid anything that might have existed. The dragon spent the last minutes of light seeking a clearing in which to land. The dragon set down, then said, "I go to hunt. When I

finish, I shall sleep. I would rest for a time.'

Tomas smiled. "You will not be needed for the balance of this journey. Where we venture, we may not return and you would have difficulty finding us.'

The dragon projected a sense of amusement at that last remark. 'Thou hast lost some sense of things, Valheru. Else thou wouldst remember there is no place within the span of space I may not reach, should I have but a reason.' 'This place exists beyond even your ability to reach .

Ryath. We enter the Halls of the Dead.'

'Then thou shalt indeed be beyond my ability to find, Tomas. Still, if thou and thy friend survive this journey, and return to the realms of life, thou hast but to call and I shall answer. Hunt well, Valheru. For I shall.' The dragon rose upward, extending her wings, then with a leap and a bound she launched herself into the darkening sky. Tomas remarked, "She is tired. Dragons usually hunt

wild game, but I think some farmer may find a brace of sheep or a cow missing tomorrow. Ryath will sleep days with a full belly.'

Pug looked about in the deepening gloom. "in our haste, we neglected such provision for ourselves.'

Tomas sat upon a deadfall and said, 'Such things never occurred in those sagas of our youth.'

Pug looked at his friend questioningly and Tomas said, 'Remember the woods near Crydee when we were boys?' His expression turned mirthful. 'in all our youthful dramas we conquered our foes in time to get home for dinner.'

Pug joined his friend in sitting. With a small chuckle, he said, "I remember. You always played the fallen hero of some great tragic battle, bidding his loyal followers good-bye.'

Tomas's voice revealed a thoughtful tone. 'Only this time we don't simply get up and return to Mother's kitchen for a hot meal after we're killed.'

A long moment passed. Pug said, 'Still, we might as well make ourselves as comfortable as we can. This is as likely a spot to wait for dawn as any other. I suspect the Necropolis is overgrown, else we would have seen it from the air. We'll be better able to locate it tomorrow.' He

added, with a faint smile, 'Besides, Ryath isn't the only one who's tired.'

'Sleep if you feel the need.' Tomas's eyes studied something in the brush. "I've learned to ignore the need at will.' His expression caused Pug to turn his head, following Tomas's gaze. Something moved in the dark. Then a roar erupted from the forests behind them. One moment the clearing had been silent, then something or someone was leaping out of the woods upon Tomas's back.

The half-cry, half-roar was answered by a dozen more. Pug sprang to his feet as Tomas was rocked forward by the impact of the thing upon his back. But while this creature or man seemed near Tomas's equal in size, no mortal upon Midkemia was his equal in strength. Tomas simply stood erect, gripping the thing on his back by a handful of fur. With a yank, he tossed it overhead as he would a child, sending it crashing into another creature running toward him.

Pug clapped his hands together overhead and the glade rang with the sound of a thunderclap centring upon him. It was deafening, and those nearby faltered. Blinding light erupted from Pug's upraised hands, and those surrounding Tomas and Pug froze.

They looked to be tigers, but their bodies had been altered into man shapes. Their heads were orange with black stripes, as were their arms and legs. Each wore a cuirass of blue metal and breeches ending at mid-thigh, of some blue-black material. Each carried a short sword, and a belt knife.

In the glare they crouched, blinded by the light of Pug's magic. He quickly incanted another spell and the tiger-men toppled. Pug staggered a little, inhaling with a loud sound as he sat upon the deadfall. 'That was almost too much. The spell of sleep cast on so many. . .'

Tomas seemed to listen with only half his attention. He had his sword out and his shield at the ready. 'There are more in the woods.'

Pug shook off his fogginess and rose. In the surrounding forest the sound of soft movement murmured like the gentle stirring of branches in a light breeze, but no wind blew this night. Then, as one, another dozen figures materialized from the gloom, all similar to the fallen. In a thick, slurred speech, one said, 'Put away your weapons man. You are surrounded.' The others seemed crouched, ready to spring like the giant cats they resembled.

Tomas looked at Pug, who nodded. Tomas permitted one of the tiger-men to disarm him. The leader of the tiger-men waved at them, saying, 'Bind them!'

Tomas allowed himself to be tied, as did Pug. The leader said, 'You have slain many of my warriors.'

Pug said, 'They only sleep.'

One of the tiger-warriors knelt and examined a sleeper. "Tuan, it is true.'

The one called Tuan examined Pug's face closely. 'You are a spellcaster, it seems, yet you allow yourself to be taken easily. Why?'

Pug said, "Curiosity. And we have no wish to harm

you.'

The surrounding tiger-men began to laugh, or something like it. Then Tomas simply parted his wrists. The bonds snapped instantly. He extended his hand toward the warrior holding his golden sword and the weapon flew from the startled creature's grasp into his own. The laughter died.

In a startled rage, the one called Tuan snarled and swung a clawed hand at Pug's face, fingers hooked and long talons extending from between them. Pug instantly raised his hand and a small golden light erupted on his palm. The creature's claws rebounded from that light as if from steel.

The surrounding creatures began to close upon them once more, two grabbing Tomas from behind. He simply tossed them aside and grabbed the one called Tuan by the scruff of the neck. Tuan stood six feet tall and more, but Tomas lifted him easily. Like any cat grabbed by the scruff, he dangled helplessly. "Halt, or this one dies!" Tomas ordered.

The creatures hesitated. Then one of the tiger-warriors bent his knee. He was followed by the rest. Tomas released Tuan and let him fall. The leader of the tiger-men landed lightly and spun. "What manner of being are you?'

"I am Tomas, once called Ashen-Shugar, Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches. I am of the Valheru.'

At that the tiger-men began to make small mewing noises, half growls, half , whimpers. "Ancient One!" was repeated several times. They huddled together in abject

terror. Pug said, 'What is this and who are these creatures?'

Tomas said, "They are fearful of me, for I am a legend come to life before them. These are Draken-Korin's creatures.' Seeing Pug's look of incomprehension, he added, 'One of the Valheru. He was Lord of Tigers and bred these to stand as guards in his palace.' He looked about. "I guess it would be in one of the caves in this forest.' To Tuan he said, 'Do you war on men?'

Tuan, still crouching, snarled. "We war on all who invade our forest, Ancient One. It is our land, as you should know. It was you who made us a free people.'

Tomas's eyes narrowed, then opened wide. "I . . . I remember.' His face turned slightly pale. He said to Pug, "I thought I had remembered all of those days. . .'

Tuan said, 'We had thought you but men. The Rana of Maharta makes war upon the Priest-King of Lanada. His war elephants command the plains, but the forests are still ours. This year he is allied with the Overlord of the City of the Serpent River, who lends him soldiers. The Rana sends those against us. So we kill any who come here, dwarves, goblins, or serpent men.'

Pug said, 'Pantathians!'

Tuan said, 'So men call them. The land of the serpents lies somewhere to the south, but they come north at times to do mischief. We treat them harshly.' He said to Tomas, "Have you come to enslave us again, Ancient One?' Tomas recovered from his reverie. "No, those days are

vanished in the past. We seek the Halls of the Dead, in the City of the Dead Gods. Guide us.'

Tuan waved away his warriors. "I shall guide you.' To the others he spoke in a growling, guttural language. In scant moments they vanished into the gloom between the boles of the forest. When all were gone, he said, 'Come we have far to go.'

Tuan led them throughout the night, and as they travelled, Pug asked many questions. At first the tiger-man was reluctant to speak to the magician, but Tomas indicated he should cooperate and the leader of the tiger-men did so. The tiger nation lived in a small city to the east of where the dragon had landed. Dragons had long been hated by the tigers, as they raided the herds raised by the tiger-men. So a full patrol had been sent in case the dragon needed to be driven away.

Their city had no name, being only the City of the Tigers. No man had seen this place and lived, for the tiger-men killed any invaders. Tuan revealed a great distrust of men and when queried said only, 'We were here before men. They took our forests to the east. We resisted. There has always been war between us.'

Of the Pantathians Tuan knew little, except they warranted killing on sight. When Pug asked how the tiger-men came to be or how Tomas had freed them, he was answered only by silence. As Tomas seemed equally reticent, Pug did not press the question.

After climbing the forested hills below the Pillars of Heaven, they came to a deep pass. Tuan halted. To the east the grey of dawn was approaching. "Here live the gods,' he said. They looked upward. The tips of the mountains were receiving the first rays of sun. White

clouds mantled the peaks of the Pillars of heaven, wrapping them in glowing mists, which reflected the light in white and silver sparkles.

"How high are the peaks?" asked Pug.

'No one knows. No mortal has reached them. We allow pilgrims to pass this way unmolested if they stay south of our boundaries. Those who climb do not return. The gods prefer their privacy. Come.'

Tuan led them into the pass, which descended into a ravine. "Beyond this pass, the ravine widens to a broad plateau at the base of the mountains. There lies the City of the Dead Gods. It is now overgrown with trees and vines. Within the city is the great temple to the lost gods. Beyond is the abode of the departed. I will go no farther, Ancient One. You and your spellcaster companion may survive, but for mortals it is a journey without return. To enter the Halls of the Dead is to quit the lands of life.'

'We have no further need of you. Depart in peace.'

Tuan said, 'Hunt well, Ancient One.' Then Tuan was off, with a running, bounding gait.

Without conversation, Tomas and Pug entered the ravine.

Pug and Tomas walked slowly through the plaza. Pug took mental note of every wonder. Oddly shaped buildings - hexagonal, pentagonal, rhomboidal, pyramidal were arranged in an apparently haphazard fashion, but one that seemed almost to make sense, as if the beholder was not quite sophisticated enough to comprehend the pattern. Obelisks of improbable design, great upthrusting columns of jet and ivory inscribed with runic carvings unknown to Pug stood at the four corners of the plaza. A city it was, but a city unlike any other, for it was a city without markets, or stables, a city lacking taverns or even the rudest hut for a man to dwell within. For in every direction they could travel, only tombs rose up. And upon each a single name was inscribed over the entrance.

"Who built this place?" Pug wondered aloud.

"The gods," Tomas replied. Pug studied his companion

and saw there was no jest in his words.

'Can this truly be SO?'

Tomas shrugged. 'Even to such as us some things remain a mystery

Some agency constructed those tombs.' He pointed at one of the major buildings near the square. "That bears the name Isanda.' Tomas looked lost in memory. (When my kin rose up against the gods, I remained apart.' Pug did not fail to notice Tomas's reference to his kin, in the past he had spoken of AshenShugar

as a being apart. Tomas continued. 'The gods were new then, coming into their power, while the Valheru were ancient. It was the passing of an old order and the birth of a new one. But the gods were powerful. at least those who survived. Of the hundred who were formed by Ishap, only sixteen survived, the twelve lesser and four greater gods. The others lie here.' He pointed again to the building. 'Isanda was the Goddess of Dance.' He looked about slowly. 'It was the time of the Chaos Wars.'

Tomas moved past Pug, clearly reluctant to speak more. Upon another building was inscribed the name Onanka-Tith. Pug said, 'What do you make of that?' Tomas spoke quietly while he walked. 'The Joyful Warrior and the Planner of Battles were both mortally wounded, but by combining their remaining essences they survived in part, as a new being, Tith-Onanka, the War God with Two Faces. Here lie those parts of each which did not survive.'

Softly Pug observed, "'each time I think I have witnessed a wonder unsurpassed. . . It humbles me.' After a long stretch of quiet, as they passed dozens of 'buildings upon which were inscribed names alien to Pug, the magician said, 'How is it that immortals die, Tomas?' Tomas did not look at his friend as he spoke. 'Nothing is forever, Pug.' Then he looked at Pug, who saw a strange light in his friend's eyes, as if Tomas were poised for battle. 'Nothing. Immortality, power, dominance, all are illusions. Don't you see? We are simply pawns in a game beyond our understanding.'

Pug let his eyes sweep over the ancient city, its strange assortment of buildings half overgrown with lianas. 'That

is what humbles me most.' "Now, we must seek one who might understand this

game. Macros.' He pointed at a gigantic edifice, a building dwarfing those about it. Upon it were carved four names, Sang, Drusala, Fortis, and Wodar-Hospur. Tomas said, 'The monument to the lost gods.' He pointed to each name in turn. 'The lost God of Magic, who, it is thought, hid his secrets when he vanished. Which may be why only the Lesser Path rose upon this world among men. Drusala, the Goddess of Healing, whose fallen staff was picked up by Sung, who keeps it against the day of her sister's return. Fortis, old dolphin-tail, the true God of the Sea. Kilian now holds sway over his dominion. She is now mother of all nature. And Wodar-Hospur, the Lorekeeper who, alone among all beings below Ishap, knew Truth.'

'Tomas, how do you know so much?'

Looking at his friend, he answered, "I remember. I did

not rise to challenge the gods, Pug, but I was there. I saw. And I remember.' There was a note of terrible, bitter pain in his tone, which he could not mask from his lifelong friend. They began to walk on, and Pug knew Tomas would

speak no more on this subject, at least for the present. Tomas led Pug into the vast hall of the four lost gods. A grey light illuminated the temple, filling the gigantic room with an amber glow. Even to the high vaulted ceiling, no shadows existed. On each side of the hall a pair of gigantic stone thrones sat empty and waiting. Opposite the entrance a vast cavern led away into darkness. Pointing at that black maw, Tomas said, "The Halls of the Dead.' Without comment, Pug began walking, and soon both

were engulfed in darkness.

One moment they had existed in a real, albeit alien, world, the next they had entered a realm of the spirit. As if a coldness beyond enduring had passed through them, they each felt an instant of supreme discomfort and another instant of near-rapture. Then they were truly within the Halls of the Dead.

Shapes and distances appeared to have little meaning, for one moment they seemed in a narrow tunnel, then upon an endless sunlit field of grasses. Next they passed through a garden, with babbling brooks and fruit-laden trees. After that, they walked below an ice flow, a whiteblue frozen cataract spilling from a cliff surmounted by a giant hall from which issued joyous music. Then they seemed to walk atop clouds. But at last they were in a dark and vast cavern, ancient dead rock vaulting away into a darkness beyond any eyes' ability to penetrate.

Pug ran his hand over the rock and discovered the surface to have a slippery feel, as of soapstone. Yet when he rubbed thumb and fingers together, there was no residue. Pug put away his curiosity. A broad river slowly flowed across their path, and in the distance they could see another shore through dense mist. Then from out of the fog came a wherry, with a single figure hidden by heavy robes at the stern, propelling the craft by means of a skull. As the boat gently nudged the shore, the figure raised the large oar out of the water and motioned for Tomas and Pug to board.

'The ferryman!' said Pug.

"It is a common legend. At least here it is true. Come.'

They boarded, and the figure held out a gnarled hand.

Pug removed two copper coins from his purse and deposited them in the outstretched hand. Pug sat, and was astounded to discover the wherry had reversed itself and was now heading across the river. He had felt no sensation of motion. A sound from behind caused him to

turn, and over his shoulder he saw vague shapes on the shore they had left, quickly hidden by mist.

Tomas said, 'Those who fear to cross or who cannot pay the boatman. They abide upon the far shore for eternity, or so it is supposed.' Pug could only nod. He looked down into the river and was further astonished to see that the water glowed faintly, lit from below by a yellow-green light. And within its depth stood figures, each looking up to the boat as it passed overhead. Feebly they waved at the boat or reached out, as if seeking to grab hold, but the boat was too quickly past. Tomas said, 'Those who attempted to cross without the ferryman's permission. Trapped for all time.'

Pug spoke softly, "Which way were they seeking to cross?"

Tomas said, "only they know."

The boat bumped against the far shore, and the ferryman silently pointed. They disembarked, and Pug glanced back to discover the wherry gone from sight.

Tomas said, "It is a journey that may be taken in one direction only. Come."

Pug hesitated, but realized the point of no return had just been crossed and reluctance was useless. He gazed at the river for a last, lingering moment and quickly followed Tomas.

They paused in their trek. One moment Pug and Tomas had been walking upon an empty plain of greys and blacks, the next, a vast building rose before them, if in fact it was a building. In each direction it stretched, to vanish at the horizon, more a wall of immense proportion. Upward into the strange grey which served as a sky in this forlorn place it rose, until the eye could no longer follow its lines. It was a wall in this reality, one with a

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looked over his shoulder and saw nothing but plain behind. He and Tomas had spoken infrequently since leaving the river some unknown time before. There had been nothing to comment on and somehow breaking the silence seemed inappropriate. Pug looked forward once more and discovered Tomas's eyes

upon him.

Tomas pointed and Pug nodded and they mounted the simple stone steps to the large open portal before them. Crossing the threshold, they halted, for they were greeted by a sight that confounded their senses. In every direction, even behind them, a vast marble floor stretched away, upon which rows of catafalques were arrayed. Atop each rested a body. Pug approached the nearest and studied its features. The figure seemed



asleep, for it was unmarked, but the chest was still. It was a girl no more than seven years of age.

Beyond lay men and women of every description from beggars in tatters to those wearing royal raiment. Bodies old and rotting, and those shattered or burned beyond recognition, lay beside bodies unmarked. Infants, dead at birth, lay beside withered ancient crones. Truly they were now within the Halls of the Dead.

Tomas said softly, "It seems one direction is much the same as another."

Pug shook his head. "We are within the boundaries of eternity. I think we must discover a path, or we shall wander without let for ages. I do not know if time has any meaning here, but if it does we cannot afford to idle it away." Pug closed his eyes and concentrated. Above his head glowing mists gathered, forming into a pulsating globe that began to rotate rapidly. A faint white light could be seen within, then the conjuration vanished. Pug's eyes remained closed. Tomas watched quietly. He knew Pug was using some mystic sight to scout in moments what would have taken years on foot. Then Pug's eyes were open and he pointed. "That way." Figures waited quietly without the portal to the next hall. It was an oddity of this place that from one angle more corpses could be seen stretching away in every direction, forming a chessboard of reclining figures, but from another angle a new wall was visible, one with another arched portal. Before it more than a thousand men and women, boys and girls, stood silently. While Pug and Tomas approached, one of the reclining figures sat up and dismounted the catafalque to walk past them and join with those waiting by the door. Pug looked back and saw another figure approaching from a different direction. He glanced at the just vacated catafalque and saw another body had appeared in place of the former occupant. Pug and Tomas moved past those who hovered by the door, discovering they took no notice of the newcomers' presence. Pug reached out and touched a child's shoulder, and the small boy absently brushed at Pug's hand, as if an insect had briefly alighted there. But the boy betrayed no other awareness of the magician. Tomas indicated with a jerk of his head they should continue. Through the door they found more people standing, in lines that led away beyond the limits of their perception. Again there was no reaction to their passing. Quickly the two men walked toward the head of the line

For what seemed hours a light had been brightening before them. Thousands of figures formed silent lines facing that brilliance, each seemingly without impatience. They passed those who stood turned toward the light,

expressions impossible to fathom upon their faces. Every so often Pug would notice those in one of the lines taking a step forward, but the lines moved at a snail's pace. As they approached the shining light, Pug glanced behind and noticed there were no shadows cast. Another oddity of this realm, he considered.

Then at last they reached stairs.

Atop a dozen steps sat a throne, surrounded with golden brilliance. Something almost like music tickled at the edge of Pug's hearing, but it was not substantial enough to be apprehended. He lifted his eyes until he beheld the figure upon the throne. She was stunning in her beauty, yet frightening. Her features were impossibly perfect, but somehow daunting. She confronted the converging lines of humanity before her and studied each person at the head of the line for some time. Then she would point at one of the figures and motion. Most often the figures simply vanished, to whatever destiny the goddess had selected, but occasionally one would turn and begin the long trek back toward the plain of catafalques. After some time she turned to regard the two men, and Pug's gaze was captured by eyes like sooty coal, flat jet without any hint of warmth or light contained therein, the eyes of death. Yet for all her fearful demeanour, a face the colour of white chalk, she was a figure of incredible seduction, one whose lush form cried out to be embraced. Pug felt his being burn with the need to be gathered within the folds of her white arms, to be taken to her bosom. Pug used his powers to set aside those desires, and he stood his ground. Then the woman upon the throne laughed, and it was the coldest, deadest sound Pug had ever heard. "Welcome to my domain, Pug and Tomas. Your means of arrival is unusual." Pug's mind reeled and raced. Each word from the woman was an icy stab through his brain, a chilled pain, as if merely to comprehend the goddess's existence was something nearly beyond his ability. With certainty he knew that without his training and Tomas's heritage they would have been overwhelmed, swept away, most likely dead, by the force of her first uttered word. Still he maintained his equilibrium and stood his ground.

Tomas spoke. "Lady, you know our needs."

The figure nodded. "indeed, better than yourselves, perhaps." "Then will you tell us what we need to know? We

dislike being here as much as our presence displeases you." Again the bone-chilling laugh. "You displease me not

at all, Valheru. Of your kin I have often longed to take one to my service. But time and circumstances have never permitted. And Pug shall eventually come here, in

time. Yet when that occurs, he shall be like these before me, standing in patient line for their turn to be judged. All wait upon my pleasure, some shall return for another turn of the Wheel, others shall be granted the ultimate punishment, oblivion, and fewer still will earn dual rapture, oneness with the Ultimate.

"Still," she said, as if thoughtful, "it is not yet his time.

No, we all must act as is foreordained. He whom you seek does not abide with me yet. Of all those within the mortal realms, he above all has been most astute in declining my hospitality. No, to find Macros the Black, you will need to look elsewhere.'

Tomas considered. 'May we know where he is?'

The lady upon the throne leaned forward. "There are limits, Valheru, even to what I may attempt. Put your mind to the task and you shall know where the black sorcerer abides. There can be only one answer.' She turned her gaze again upon Pug. 'Silent, magician? You have said nothing.' Softly Pug said, "I wonder, lady. Still, if I may' - he

waved a hand at those about him - 'is there no joy in this realm?' For a moment the lady upon the throne regarded the

silent lines of people arrayed before her. It was as if the question was new to her. Then she said, "No, there is no joy in the realm of the dead.' She again studied the magician. "But consider, there is also no sorrow. Now you must away, for the quick may abide here a short while only. And there are those within my realm who would distress you to apprehend. You must go.'

Tomas nodded and with a stiff bow, led Pug away.

Past long lines they hurried, as the brilliance of the goddess dimmed behind. It seemed hours they walked. Suddenly Pug halted, transfixed by recognition. A young man with wavy brown hair stood quietly in line, his eyes fixed forward. In near-silent voice, Pug said, 'Roland.'

Tomas paused, studying the face of their companion from Crydee, dead for almost three years. He took no notice of his two former friends. Pug said, 'Roland, it's Pug.' Again there was no reaction. Pug shouted the squire from Tulan's name, and there was a nearly imperceptible flicker about the eyes, as if Roland heard a distant voice calling. Pug looked pained as his boyhood rival for Carline's affections took a step forward in the long line of those to be judged. Pug's mind ached for something to say to him. Then at last he shouted, 'Carline is well, Roland. She is happy.'

For a moment there was no reaction, then, faintly, the corners of Roland's mouth turned up for the briefest

instant. But Pug thought he looked somehow more at peace as he stared blankly forward. Then Pug suddenly discovered Tomas's hand upon his arm, and the powerful warrior propelled his friend away from Roland. Pug struggled an instant, but to no avail, then walked in step with Tomas. A moment later, Tomas released his grip. Softly he said, 'They're all here, Pug. Roland. Lord Boric and his lady Catherine. The men who died in the Green Heart, and those taken by the wraith in Macmordain Cadal. King Rodric. All who died in the Riftwar. They're all here. That's what Lims-Kragma meant by saying there were those here who would cause us distress if we met.'

Pug only nodded. Again he felt a deep sense of loss for those whom fate had taken away from him. Turning his mind again to the cause of their strange travel, he said, 'Where are we bound now?'

"By not answering, the Lady of Death answered. There

is only one place beyond her reach. It is an oddity outside the known universe. We must find the City Forever, that place which stands beyond the edge of time.' Pug halted. Looking about, he noticed they had again

passed into the vast plain of bodies, all arrayed in neat rows. "Then the question is, how do we find it?"

Tomas reached out and placed his hand upon Pug's face, covering his eyes. A bone-wrenching chill passed through the magician, and he suddenly found his chest exploding in hot fire as he sucked in a lungful of air. His teeth chattered and he shook, a fierce, uncontrollable trembling as his body coiled and uncoiled in knots of pain. He moved and discovered he was lying on a cold marble floor. Tomas's hand was gone from his eyes and he opened them. He lay upon the floor in the Temple of the Four Lost Gods, just before the entrance to the dark cavern. Tomas rose on wobbly legs a short distance away, also pulling in ragged gasps of air. Pug saw that his friend's face was pale, his lips bluish. The magician regarded his own hands and saw the nails were blue to the quick. Standing, he felt warmth creep slowly back into his limbs, which ached and shook. He spoke, and his voice was a dry croak. 'Was it real?'

Tomas looked about, his alien features showing little. 'Of all mortal men on this world, Pug, you should know best how futile that question is. We saw what we saw. Whether it was a place or a vision in our mind, it doesn't matter. We must act upon what we experienced, so to that end, yes, it was real.'

'Now?'

Tomas said, "I must summon Ryath, if she is not too deep in sleep . We must travel between the stars once again. Pug could only nod. His mind was numb, and dimly he wondered what possible marvels could await beyond that which was already behind.

8

Yabon

The inn was quiet.

It was fully two hours before sundown and the hectic quality of evening revelry was not yet unleashed. For this, Arutha was thankful. He sat as deep in shadows as he could, Roald, Laurie, and the two squires occupying the other chairs. His newly cropped hair, shorter than he had worn in years and his thickening beard lent him a sinister appearance, giving credence to their impersonation of mercenaries. Jimmy and Locklear had purchased more common travel clothing in Questor's View, burning their squire's tunics. In all, the five of them looked to be nothing more than a simple crew of unemployed fighting men. Even Locklear was convincing, for he was no younger than some of those who passed through, aspiring young bravos seeking their first tour of duty.

They had been waiting three days for Martin, and Arutha was growing apprehensive. Given the timing of the message, he had expected Martin to reach Ylith first. Also, each day in the city increased the chance of someone's remembering them from their last encounter here. A tavern brawl ending in a killing, while not unique, was still something to cause a few to remember a

A shadow crossed the table and they looked up. Martin and Baru stood before them. Arutha rose slowly and Martin calmly extended his hand. They quietly shook, and Martin said, "Good seeing you well." Arutha smiled crookedly. "Good for me also." Martin's answering smile was his brother's twin. 'You look different.' Arutha only nodded. Then he and the others greeted Baru, and Martin said, "How did he get here?" He pointed at Jimmy. Laurie said, "How can you stop him?" Martin looked at Locklear and raised an eyebrow. "This one's face I recognize, though I don't recall the

name.'

'That's Locky.' 'Jimmy's protege,' Roald added with a chuckle.

Martin and Baru exchanged glances. The tall Duke

said, 'Two of them?'

Arutha said, 'It's a long tale. We should tarry here as little as possible.'

'Agreed,' answered Martin. 'But we'll need new horses. Ours are weary, and I expect we still have a long road before us.'

Arutha's eyes narrowed and he said, 'Yes. Very long.'

The clearing was little more than a widening in the road. To Arutha's party the roadhouse was a welcoming beacon, every window on both floors showing a merry yellow light that knifed through the oppressive gloom of night. They had ridden without incident since leaving Ylith, passing beyond Zun and Yabon, and were now at the last outpost of Kingdom civilization, where the forest road turned northeast for Tyr-Sog. To travel directly north was to enter Hadati country, and the northern ranges beyond marked the boundary of the Kingdom. While there had been no trouble, all were relieved to be reaching this inn.

A sharp-eared stable boy heard them ride up and came down from his loft to open the barn - few travelled the forest roads after sundown and he had been about to turn in. They quickly cared for their animals, Jimmy and Martin occasionally watching the woods for signs of trouble.

When they were done, they gathered their bundles and headed for the roadhouse. As they crossed the clearing between barn and main building, Laurie said, 'It will be nice to have a warm meal.'

'Maybe our last for a while,' commented Jimmy to Locklear.

As they reached the front of the building, they could make out the sign over the door, a man sleeping atop a wagon while his mule had broken its traces and was making its getaway. Laurie said, 'Now for some hot food. The Sleeping Wagoneer is among the finest little country inns you'll ever visit, though at times you may find it occupied by a rather strange assortment.'

Pushing open the door, they entered a bright and cheery common room. A large open hearth contained a roaring fire, and three long tables stood before it. Across the room, opposite the door, ran a long bar, behind which rested large hogsheads of ale. And making his way toward them, a smile upon his face, came the innkeeper, a man of middle years and portly appearance. 'Ah, guests. Welcome.' When he reached them, his smile broadened. 'Laurie! Roald! As I live! It's been years! Glad I am to see you.'

The minstrel said, 'Greetings, Geoffrey. These are companions of mine.'

Geoffrey took Laurie by the elbow and guided him to a table near the bar. 'Your companions are as welcome as yourself.' He seated them at the table and said, "Pleased as I am to see you, I wish you had been here

two days ago. I could have done with a good singer.'

Laurie smiled at that. "Trouble!"

A look of perpetual trial crossed the innkeeper's face.

'Always.

We had a party of dwarves through here and they sang their drinking songs all hours. They insisted on keeping time to the songs by beating on the tables with whatever was at hand, winecups, flaggons, hand axes, all in complete disregard for whatever was upon them. I've broken crockery and scarred tables all over. I only managed to return the common room to a semblance of order this afternoon, and I had to repair half of one table.' He fixed Roald and Laurie with a mock-stern expression. "So don't start trouble, like the last time. One ruckus a week is plenty.' He glanced around the room. "It is quiet now, but I expect a caravan through at any time. Ambros the silver merchant passes through this time of year.' Roald said, "Geoffrey, we perish from thirst.'

the man became instantly apologetic. "Truly, I am sorry. Fresh in from the road and I stand jabbering like a magpie. What is your pleasure?"

'Ale,' said Martin, and the others echoed the request.

The man hurried away, and returned moments later with a tray of pewter jacks, all brimming with cool ale,

After the first draught of the biting liquid, Laurie said, "What brings dwarves this far from home?"

The innkeeper joined them at the table, wiping his hands on his apron. 'Have you not heard the news?"

Laurie said~ "We're just in from the south. What news?" 'The dwarves moot at Stone Mountain, meeting in the

long hall of Chief Harthorn at village Delmoria.'

"To what ends?" asked Arutha.

(Well, the dwarves through here were up all the way from Dorgin, and from their talk it's the first time in age's the eastern dwarves have ventured up to visit their brethren in the West. Old King Halfdan of Dorgin is sending his son Hogne, and his rowdy companions, to witness the restoration of the line of Tholin in the West . With the return of Tholin's hammer during the Riftwar, the western dwarves have been pestering Dolgan of Caldara to take the crown lost with Tholin. Dwarves from the Grey Towers, Stone Mountain, Dorgin, and

places i've never heard of are gathering to see Dolgan made King of the western dwarves. As Dolgan has agreed to moot, Hogne says it's a foregone conclusion he'll take the crown, but you know how dwarves can be. Some things they decide quickly, other things they take years to consider. Comes of being long lived, I guess.'

Arutha and Martin exchanged faint smiles. Both remembered Dolgan with affection. Arutha had first met him years ago when riding east with his father to carry news to King Rodric of the coming, Tsurani invasion. Dolgan had acted as their guide through the ancient mine, the Mac Mordain Cadal. Martin had met him later, during the war. The dwarven chief was a being of high principle and bravery, possessing a dry wit and keen mind. They both knew he would be a fine King.

As they drank, they slowly discarded their travellers accoutrements, putting off helms, setting aside weapons and letting the quiet atmosphere of the inn relax them. Geoffrey kept the ale coming and, after a while, a fine meal of meats, cheeses, and hot vegetables and breads. Talk ran to the mundane, as Geoffrey repeated stories told by travellers. While they ate, Laurie said, 'Things are quiet this night, Geoffrey.'

Geoffrey said, 'Yes, besides yourselves I have only one other guest.' He indicated a man sitting in the corner farthest from them, and all turned in surprise for a moment. Arutha motioned for the others to resume their meal. All wondered how they had failed to notice him there all this time. The stranger seemed indifferent to the newcomers. He was a plain-looking fellow, of middle years, with nothing remarkable about him in either manner or dress. He wore a heavy brown cloak that hid any chain or leather armour he might be wearing. A shield rested against the table, its blazon masked by a plain leather cover. Arutha became curious, for only a disinherited man or one on some holy quest would choose to disguise his blazon - among honest men, Arutha added silently. He asked Geoffrey, 'Who is he?' 'Don't know. Name's Crows. Been here for two days, coming just after the dwarves left. Quiet sort. Keeps to himself. But he pays his bill and makes no trouble.'

Geoffrey began clearing the table.

When the innkeeper was gone to the kitchen, Jimmy leaned across the table as if to reach for something in a pack on the other side and said quietly, "He's good. He makes no show, but he is straining to hear our conversation. Guard your words. I'll keep an eye on our friend over there. '

When Geoffrey returned, he said, "Where are you bound, Laurie?'

Arutha answered, 'Tyr-Sog.'



Jimmy thought he noticed a flicker of interest in the sole occupant of the other table, but he couldn't be sure. The man seemed intent upon his meal. Geoffrey clapped Laurie upon the shoulder. "Not going back to see your family, are you?" Laurie shook his head. "No, not really. Too many years. Too many differences.' All save Baru and Locklear knew Laurie had been disowned by his father. As a boy, Laurie had proved an indifferent farmer, being more interested in daydreams and song. With so many mouths to feed, his father had tossed him out on his own at age thirteen. The innkeeper said, 'Your father came through here

two, no, almost three years back. Just before the end of the war. He and some other farmers were caravanning grain down to LaMut for the army.' He studied Laurie's face. 'He spoke of you.'

A strange expression crossed the former minstrel's face, one unreadable to those around the table. "I had mentioned it had been years since you came by and he said, "'Well then, ain't we the lucky ones? That worthless layabout hasn't pestered me in years either.'" '

Laurie erupted in laughter. Roald joined in. 'That's my father. I hope the old sod is still well.'

"I expect," said Geoffrey. 'He and your brothers seem to be doing fine. If I can, I'll send word you were through. Last any of us heard of you, you were off somewhere with the army, and that was five or six years back. From where have you come?'

Laurie glanced at Arutha, both sharing the same thought. Salador was a distant eastern court, and word had not yet made its way to the frontier that a son of Tyr-Sog was now Duke there, married to the King's sister. Both were relieved.

Arutha tried to sound offhanded in his answer.

"Around, here and there. Most recently Yabon.'

Geoffrey sat at the table. Drumming his fingers on the wood, he said, 'You might do well to wait for Ambros to pass here. He'll be bound for Tyr-Sog. I am sure he could use a few more guards, and these roads are better travelled in large companies.'

Laurie said, 'Troubles?'

Geoffrey said, 'in the forest? Always, but more so of late. For weeks now there have been stories of goblins and brigands troubling travellers. It's nothing new, but there seems to be more of that going on than is usual, and something odd is the goblins and bandits almost always are reported as travelling northward.' He lapsed into silence for a moment. "Then there's something the dwarves said when they first arrived. It was right

strange.'

Laurie feigned amused uninterest. 'Dwarves tend to the strange.'

"But this was unusually so, Laurie. The dwarves claim they crossed the path of some Dark Brothers and, being dwarves, proceeded to have a bash at them. They claim they were chasing these Dark Brothers when they killed one, or at least should have. This one creature wouldn't have the decency to die, the dwarves avowed. Maybe these youngsters sought to pull a simple innkeeper's leg, but they said they hit this one Brother with an axe, damn near split his head in two, but the thing just sort of pushes the halves together and runs off after his companions. Shocked the dwarves so fierce they stopped in their tracks and forgot to chase after. That's the other thing. The dwarves said they've never met a band of Dark Brothers so intent on running away, like they had to get somewhere and couldn't take the time to fight. They're a mean lot as a rule and they don't like dwarves a little more than they don't like everybody else.'

Geoffrey smiled and winked. "I know the older dwarves are sombre sorts and not given to stretching the truth, but these youngsters were having me on a little, I think.' Arutha and the others showed little expression, but all knew the story to be true : and that it meant the Black Slayers were again abroad in the Kingdom.

Arutha said, "It probably would be best to wait for the silver merchant's caravan, but we've got to be off at first light.' Laurie said, 'With only one other guest, I assume

there's no trouble with rooms.'

"None.' Geoffrey leaned forward and whispered, "I mean no disrespect toward a paying guest, but he sleeps in the commons. I've offered him a room at discount, since I've ample space, but he says no. What some will do to save a little silver.' Geoffrey rose. 'How many rooms?' Arutha said, 'Two should provide comfort.'

The innkeeper seemed disappointed, but given travellers were often short of funds, he was not surprised. 'I'll have extra pallets brought into the rooms.'

As Arutha and his companions gathered up their belongings, Jimmy glimpsed the other man. He seemed intent on the contents of his wine cup and little else. Geoffrey brought over some candles and lit them with a taper from the fire. Then he led them up the dark stairs to their rooms.

Something woke Jimmy. The former thief's senses were more attuned to changes in the night than were his companions'. He and Locklear were bunking in with

Roald and Laurie. Arutha, Martin, and Baru slept across the narrow hall, in a room over the common room, and as the soft sound that had awakened him came from outside, Jimmy was certain it hadn't roused the former Huntmaster of Crydee or the hillman. The young squire of the Prince's court strained his hearing to its limit. Again came a sound in the night, a faint rustling. He quietly got up from his pallet on the floor, next to Locklear's. Passing the sleeping forms of Roald and Laurie, he peered out the window between their beds. In the darkness he caught a glimpse of movement, as if something or someone had just moved behind the barn. Jimmy wondered if he should wake the others but thought it would be foolish to raise alarm over nothing. He gathered up his own sword and quietly left the room. His bare feet made no sound as he moved toward the stairs. At the landing atop the stairs another window opened on the front of the inn. Jimmy peeked through and in the gloom saw figures moving near the trees across the road. He counted it unlikely that anyone skulking out in the night was up to honest undertakings. ' Jimmy hurried down the stairs and found the door unbolted. He puzzled at that, for he was near certain it had been bolted when they retired. Then Jimmy remembered the inn's other guest. He spun about and saw the man was gone. Jimmy moved to a window, pulling aside a peep slide

in the shutters, and saw nothing. Silently he let himself out the door, and dodged along the front of the building, trusting the gloom of the night to mask him. He hurried to the place he had last seen movement. Jimmy's ability to walk quietly was hampered by having to negotiate the forest at night. While he had gained a little comfort in these environs from his journey with Arutha to Moraelin, he was still a city boy. He was forced to move slowly. Then he heard voices. Cautiously he approached the source of the conversation and saw a faint light. He could begin to understand scraps of what was said

then he suddenly could see a half-dozen figures in a tiny clearing. The man in the brown cloak with the covered shield was speaking with a black armoured figure. Jimmy sucked in a chest full of air, to calm himself down. It was a Black Slayer. Four other moredhel stood quietly off to one side, three in the grey cloaks of the forest clans and one in the trousers and vest of the mountain clans. The man in brown was speaking. ' . . . nothing, I say. Bravos from the look of them, with a minstrel, but. . . ' The Black Slayer interrupted him. His voice was deep and seemed to come from some distance, echoing with an odd breathiness. The voice was disquietingly familiar

to Jimmy. 'You are not paid to think, human. You are paid to serve.' He punctuated that remark with a jabbing finger to the chest. 'See that I remain pleased with your work and we shall continue this relationship. Displease me and suffer the consequences.' The brown-cloaked fellow looked the sort not easily frightened, a tough fighting man, but he only nodded. Jimmy understood, for the Black Slayers were worthy of fear. Murmandamus' minions, even when dead, served him.

'You say there's a singer and a boy?' Jimmy swallowed hard.

The man tossed back his cloak, revealing brown chain mail, and said, 'Well, now that I think, you could more likely say there are two boys, but they're almost mansized.'

This brought the Black Slayer out of his reverie.

"Two?"

The man nodded. "Might be brothers from the look of them. About a size, though their hair colour's different. But they seem alike in some ways, like brothers do.'

"Moraelin. There was a boy there, but not two. . . Tell

me, is there a Hadati among them?'

The man in brown shrugged. 'Yes, but hillmen're all over. This is Yabon.'

"This one would be from the northwest, near Lake of

the Sky.' For a long moment there was only the sound of heavy breathing from behind the black helm as if the moredhel was lost in thought, or conversing with someone else. The Black Slayer hit his fist against his hand. "It could be them. Was there one who looked cunning, a slender warrior with dark hair almost to his shoulders, quick in his movements, clean shaven?"

The man shook his head. 'There's a clean-shaven fellow, but he's big, and a slender one, but he's got short hair and a beard. Who do you think it is?'

'That is not for you to know,' said the Slayer. Jimmy eased his legs by slowly shifting his weight. He knew the Black Slayer was trying to connect this band to the one that raided Moraelin for Silverthorn the year before.

Then the moredhel said, (We shall wait. News reached us two .days ago the Lord of the West is dead, but I am not foolish enough to count a man dead until I hold his heart in my hand. It may be nothing. Had an elf been with them, I would burn that inn to the ground tonight, but I cannot be sure. Still, remain alert. It could be his companions returning to do mischief, to avenge him.'

'Seven men, and two of them really boys. What harm?'

The moredhel ignored the question. 'Return to the inn and watch, Morgan Crows. You are paid well and

quickly for obedience, not questions. Should those in the inn leave, follow at a discreet distance. Should they remain upon the road to Tyr-Sog until midday, return to the inn and wait. Should they turn northward before then, I shall wish to know. Return here tomorrow night and tell me which. But tarry not, for Segersen brings his band north and you must meet him. Without the next payment, he takes his men home. I need his engineers. Is the gold safe?'

'Always with me.' 'Good. Now go.' For an instant the Black Slayer

seemed to shudder, then wobble, then his movements returned. In a completely different voice, he said, 'Do as our master instructs, human,' then turned and walked away. In a moment the clearing was empty.

Jimmy's mouth hung open. Now he understood. He had heard that first voice before, in the palace where the undead moredhel had tried to kill Arutha, and again in the basement of the House of Willows when they had destroyed the Nighthawks in Krondor. The man called Morgan Crows had been speaking not to the Black Slayer, but rather through him. And Jimmy had no doubt to whom. Murmandamus!

Jimmy's astonishment had caused him to hesitate, and suddenly he knew he could not return to the inn before Crows. Already the man had quit the clearing, taking the lantern with him. In the dark, Jimmy had to move slowly. By the time he reached the clearing near the road.

Jimmy caught a glimpse of the red glow from the hearth in the common room as Crows closed the door to the inn. He could hear the bolt driven home.

Hurrying silently along the edge of the clearing, Jimmy waited until he was opposite the window to his room. He hurried across and was quickly up the wall, the rough surface providing ample hand- and footholds. From inside his tunic he retrieved twine and a hook and quickly fished open the simple bar locking the window. He pulled it open and stepped through.

Two sword points poked him in the chest and he halted. Laurie and Roald both lowered their weapons when they saw who it was. Locklear had his sword out and guarded the door. 'What's this? Looking for a new way to die: having your friends run you through?' asked Roald.

'What's that you have there?' Laurie pointed at the

hook and twine. 'I thought you'd left all that behind.' 'Quietly,' said the boy, putting up his thieving tools. In hushed tones he said, 'You've not been a minstrel for almost a year, yet you still lug that lute with you

everywhere. Now listen, we've got troubles. That fellow in the common room works for Murmandamus.' Laurie and Roald exchanged glances. Laurie said, "You'd better tell Arutha.'

Arutha said, 'Well, we know that they've heard the news of my death. And we know Murmandamus isn't certain, despite the show in Krondor.' All had come to Arutha's room, where they spoke quietly in the dark.

"Still,' Baru said, "it seems he is acting upon the presumption you are dead until proven otherwise, despite any doubts he may harbour.'

Laurie said, "He can't sit on a Brotherhood alliance indefinitely. He has to move soon or have everything fall apart around him.'

"if we continue for another day toward Tyr-Sog, then they'll leave us alone,' said Jimmy.

"Yes,' whispered Roald, 'but there's still Segersen.' 'Who is

he?' Martin asked.

'Mercenary general,' answered Roald. 'But an odd sort. He doesn't have a large company, never a hundred men, often fewer than fifty. Mostly he employs experts: miners, engineers, tacticians. He's got the best crews in the business. His speciality is bringing down walls or keeping them up, depending on who's doing the paying. I've seen him work. He helped Baron Croswaith in his border skirmish with Baron Lobromill, when I was in Croswaith's employ.' 'I've heard of him, too,' said Arutha. "He works from

the Free Cities or Queg, so he doesn't have to deal with Kingdom laws on mercenary service.

"What I want to know, though, is what Murmandamus needs a corps of high-priced engineers for. If he's working this far west, he must needs come through Tyr-Sog or Yabon. Farther east, the Border Barons. But he's still on the other side of the mountains and won't need them for months if he's going to siege.'

'Maybe he wants to make sure no one else hires this Segersen?' ventured Locklear.

'Maybe,' said Laurie. "But most likely he needs something Segersen can provide.'

'Then we must make sure he doesn't get it,' said Arutha. Roald said, "We go half a day to Tyr-Sog, then turn

back?'

Arutha only nodded.

Arutha signalled. Roald, Laurie, and Jimmy moved slowly forward,

while Baru and Martin moved off, to circle around. Locklear stayed behind to tend the horses. They had spent half the day moving along the road to Tyr-Sog, then at a little past noon, Martin had cut off the road and dropped back. He had returned with the news the man called Crows had turned back. Now they stalked him through the night as the renegade met again with his moredhel employers.

Arutha moved up silently to look over Jimmy's shoulder. Again the Prince observed one of Murmandamus's Black Slayers. The iron-clad moredhel spoke. "Did you follow that band?" "They trundled up the road to Tyr-Sog, right proper.

Hell, I told you they was nothing. Wasted a whole day tagging after.' "You will do as our master orders.'

Jimmy whispered, "That's not the same voice. That's the second voice.'

Arutha nodded. The boy had explained the two voices, and they had seen Murmandamus take control of his servants before. "Good,' the Prince whispered back. The moredhel said, "Now wait for Segersen. You know -'

The Black Slayer seemed to leap forward, to suddenly be caught by Crows, who held him a moment, then dropped him. The startled renegade could only stare in wide-eyed wonder at the cloth-yard shaft protruding from below the edge of the creature's helm. Martin's arrow had punched through the Black Slayer's neck coif of chain mail, killing him instantly.

Before the other four moredhel could pull weapons martin had a second down, and Baru was leaping from the woods, his long sword blurring as he struck a moredhel down. Roald was across the clearing and killed another. Martin shot the last moredhel while Jimmy and Arutha charged the renegade, Crows. He made little attempt to defend himself, being shocked by the sudden attack and recognizing quickly he was outnumbered. He seemed confused, especially as he saw Martin and Baru begin to pull off the Black Slayer's armour.

Fear was replaced by shock as he saw Martin cut open the Slayer's chest and remove its heart. His eyes widened as he recognized who had taken the moredhel band.

'You, then -' His eyes searched each face as they gathered around him, then he studied Arutha's face.

'You! You're supposed to be dead!'

Jimmy quickly stripped him~ of hidden weapons and

searched about his neck. 'No ebon hawk. He's not one of them.' A feral light seemed to kindle in Crowe's eyes. 'Me,

one of them? No, by no means, Your Worships. I'm only carrying messages, sir. Making a little gold for myself, is all, Your Kindness. You know how it can be.'

Arutha waved Jimmy off. 'Fetch Locky. I don't want him out there alone if there are other Dark Brothers about.' He said to the prisoner, "What has Segersen to do with Murmandamus?"

'Segersen? Who's he?'

Roald stepped forward and, with a heavy dagger hilt in his gloved fist, struck Crows across the face, bloodying his nose. and shattering his cheek.

"Don't break his jaw, for mercy's sake," said Laurie,

'or he won't be able to tell us anything.'

Roald gave the man a kick as he lay writhing on the ground. "Listen, laddie, I don't have time to be tender with you. Now, you'd best answer up, or we'll be taking you back to the inn in little pieces.' He stroked the edge of his dagger for emphasis.

"What has Segersen to do with Murmandamus?"

Arutha repeated. "I don't know," said the man through bloody lips, and

he yelled again when Roald kicked him. 'Honestly I don't. I was only told to meet him and give him a message.'

'What message?' asked Laurie.

'The message is simple. It was only "By the Inclindel Gap." '

Baru said, 'inclindel Gap is a narrow way through the mountains, directly north from here. If Murmandamus has seized it, he can keep it open long enough for Segersen's crew to get through.'

"But we still don't know why Murmandamus needs a

company of engineers,' observed Laurie.

Roald quipped, 'For whatever you use them for, I would think.'

Arutha said, 'What is there to siege? Tyr-Sog? It's too easy to reinforce from Yabon City, and he has to find a way past the Thunderhell nomads on the other side of the mountains. Ironpass and Northwarden are too far east of here, and he wouldn't need engineers to take on the dwarves or elves. That leaves Highcastle.'

Martin had finished his bloody work and said

"Perhaps, but it's the largest of the Border Baron fortresses. '

Arutha said, "I'd not bother with siege. It's designed to withstand raids. You can swarm it, and there is nothing



we've seen of Murmandamus that indicates he's reluctant to spend lives. Besides, that would put him in the middle of the High Wold, with no place to go. No, this makes no sense. '

"Look," said the man on the ground, "I'm just a go

between, a fellow's paid to do a job. Now, you can't hold me responsible for what the Brotherhood's up to, can you, Your Kindness?'

Jimmy returned with Locklear in tow.

Martin said to Arutha, "I don't think he' knows anything else. '

A dark expression crossed Arutha's face. "He knows who we are . '

Martin nodded. 'He does.'

Suddenly Crowe's face drained of colour. 'Look, you can rely on me. I'll keep my gob shut, Your Highness.

You don't have to give me anything. Just let me go and I'll light out of these parts. Honestly.'

Locklear glanced about his grim-looking companions, comprehension escaping him.

Arutha noticed and nodded slightly to Jimmy. The older youth roughly grabbed Locklear by the upper arm and propelled him away. 'What -' said the younger squire. A short distance away, Jimmy halted. 'We wait.'

'For what?' said the boy, confusion apparent on his face. "For them to do what they have to do.

"To do what?' insisted Locklear.

"To kill the renegade.'

Locklear looked sick. Jimmy's tone became short.

'Look, Locky, this is war and people are killed. And that Crows is among the least of those who are going to die.'

Locklear couldn't believe the harsh expression he was seeing on Jimmy's face. For over a year he had seen the rogue, the scoundrel, the charmer, but now he was seeing someone he had never expected to encounter, the cold, ruthless veteran of life, a young man who had killed and who would kill again. 'That man must die,' said jimmy flatly. "He knows who Arutha is, and do you think for a minute the Prince's life's worth spit if Crows gets loose?' Locklear appeared shaken, his face pale. He slowly

closed his eyes. 'Couldn't we. . .'

'What?' demanded Jimmy savagely. 'Wait for a patrol of militia to pass so we can hand him over for trial in Tyr-Sog? Pop in to give testimony? Tie him up for a few months? Look, if it helps, just keep in mind Crows is an

outlaw and a traitor, and Arutha is dispensing High Justice. But any way you look at it, there's no choice.' Locklear's mind seemed to spin, then a strangled cry came from the clearing and the boy winced. His confusion seemed to vanish, and he only nodded. Jimmy placed his hand upon his friend's shoulder and squeezed lightly. Suddenly, he knew Locklear would never seem quite so young again.

They had returned to the inn and waited, to the delight of the somewhat perplexed Geoffrey. After three days a stranger appeared who approached Roald, who had taken to occupying the spot formerly used by Crows. The stranger had spoken briefly and then left in a rage, as Roald had told him the contract between Murmandamus and Segersen was cancelled. Martin had mentioned to Geoffrey that a famous and wanted general of mercenaries might be camped in the area, and he was sure there would be a reward to any who let the local militia know where to find him. They had left the next day, heading northward.

As they had ridden out of sight of the inn, Jimmy had remarked, 'Geoffrey's in for a pleasant surprise.'

Arutha had asked, 'Why?'

'Well, Crows never paid for his last two days' bill, so Geoffrey took his shield as security against the debt.'

Roald laughed along with Jimmy. 'You mean one of these days he's going to look under that covering.'

When everyone looked confused except Roald, Jimmy said, "'It's gold.'

'That's why Crows had so much trouble lugging it along but never left it behind,' added Roald.

'And why you buried everything save what Baru's using, but brought that back with you,' said Martin.

'it's the payment for Segersen. No one would bother a disinherited fighter without two coppers to rub together, now would they?'

said Jimmy as everyone laughed. 'Seems proper Geoffrey should get it. Heaven knows where we're going, we can't use it.'

The laughter died away.

Arutha motioned a halt. They had been moving steadily northward from the inn

for a week, twice staying in Hadati villages where Baru was known. He had been greeted with respect and honoured, for somehow his killing of Murad had become known throughout the Hadati highlands. If the hillmen had been curious about Baru's companions, they showed no sign. And Arutha and the others were certain no word of their passage would be spread.

Now they found themselves before a narrow trail leading up into the mountains, the Inclindel Gap. Baru,

who rode next to Arutha, told him, "Here we again enter enemy territory. If Segersen doesn't appear, perhaps the moredhel will withdraw their watch upon the place, but it may be we ride into their arms.'

Arutha only nodded. Baru had tied his hair back behind his head and had

wrapped his traditional swords in his plaid and hidden them in his bedroll. Now he wore Morgan Crowe's sword at his side and the renegade's chain mail over his tunic. It was as if the Hadati had ceased to exist and another common mercenary had taken his place. That was their story. They would be simply another band of renegades flocking to Murmandamus's banner, and it was hoped that story would withstand scrutiny. For days while travelling, they had discussed the problem of reaching Murmandamus. All had agreed that, even should he suspect Arutha to be still alive, the last thing Murmandamus would expect would be for the Prince of Krondor to come enlist in his army.

Without further conversation they moved out, Martin and Baru taking the lead, Arutha and Jimmy behind, Laurie and Locklear, then Roald. The experienced mercenary kept a constant watch to the rear as they rode higher into the Inclindel Gap.

For two days they rode upward, until the trail turned to the northeast. It seemed to follow the rise of the mountains somewhat, though it still ran along the south face of the mountains. In some strange sense they had yet to leave the Kingdom, for the peaks about them were where royal cartographers had chosen to indicate the boundaries between the Kingdom and the Northlands. Jimmy had no illusions about such things. They were in hostile territory. Anyone they met was likely to attack them on sight.

Martin was waiting at a bend in the road. He had resumed his habit from the trip to Moraelin Of SCOUTing on foot. The terrain was too rocky for the horses to move swiftly, so he could easily keep ahead of the party. He signalled, and the others dismounted. Jimmy and Locklear took the horses and began leading them a short way back down the trail, turning them in case it was necessary to flee. Though, Jimmy thought, that would prove a problem, for the trail was so narrow the only outlet was back where they had started.

The others reached the Duke, and he held his hand up for silence. In the distance, they could hear what had caused him to halt the party: a deep growl, punctuated by 'barking, and counterpointed by other, less familiar growling.

They drew weapons and crept forward. At a point less than ten yards beyond the turn they saw a meeting point

of two trails, one continuing northeast, the other heading off to the west. A man lay upon the ground, 'whether dead or unconscious they could not judge. Over his still body stood a giant of a dog, resembling a bull mastiff but twice the size, standing almost waist-high to a man. Around his neck a leather collar studded with pointed iron spikes gave the impression of a steel mane, while he bared teeth and growled and barked. Before him crouched three trolls.

Martin let fly with a cloth-yard arrow, taking the rearmost troll in the head. The shaft punched through the thick skull and the creature was dead without knowing it. The others turned, which proved a fatal mistake to the troll nearest the dog, for he leaped at it setting terrible fangs in the creature's throat. The third tried to flee when it saw the five men charging, but Baru was quickest to leap over the confusion of bodies on the ground and the troll died swiftly.

In a moment the only sound was that of the dog worrying the dead troll. As the men approached, the dog released the dead troll and backed away, standing guard once more over the prone man.

Baru regarded the animal, emitted a low whistle, and half whispered, "It is not possible.

Arutha said, 'What?'

"That dog.' Martin said, "Possible or not, if that man isn't dead

already, he may die because this monster won't let us near him.'

Baru spoke a strange-sounding word and the dog's ears perked up. He turned his head slightly and ceased growling. Slowly the dog moved forward, and then Baru was kneeling, scratching the animal behind the ears. Martin and Arutha hurried to examine the man, while Roald and Laurie helped the boys bring the horses along. When everyone was gathered, Martin said, 'He's dead.' The dog looked at the dead man, and whined a bit, but allowed Baru to continue petting him.

'Who is this?' asked Laurie aloud. 'What brings a man and a dog to such a desolate spot?'

'And look at those trolls,' added Roald.

Arutha nodded. 'They are armed and armoured.'

"Mountain trolls,' said Baru. 'More intelligent, cunning, and fierce than their lowland cousins. Those are little more than beasts; these are terrible foemen, Murmandamus has recruited allies.'

"But this man?' said Arutha, pointing at the corpse on

the ground.

Baru shrugged. 'Who he is I cannot say. But what he is I may venture a guess.' He regarded the dog before him,

who sat quietly. eyes closed in contentment as Baru scratched behind the ears. "This dog is like those in our villages, but greater, larger. Our dogs are descended from his breed, a breed not seen in Yabon in a century. This animal is called a Beasthound.

"Ages ago, my people lived in small, scattered villages

throughout these mountains, and the hills below. We had no cities, gathering in moot twice a year. To protect our herds from predators, we bred these, the Beasthounds. His master was the Beasthunter. The dogs were bred to a size to give even a cave bear pause.' He indicated the folds of skin around the eyes. "The dog will set teeth in an opponent's neck, these folds channelling blood away from his eyes. And he will not release that hold until the opponent's dead, or his master commands. This spiked collar prevents a larger predator from biting it about the neck.'

Locklear looked astonished. 'Larger, that thing's near the size of a pony!'

Baru smiled at the exaggeration. 'They used them to hunt wyverns.'

Locky asked, 'What's a wyvern?'

Jimmy answered. 'A small, stupid dragon - only about twelve feet high.' locky looked to the others to see if Jimmy was joking. Baru shook his head, indicating he wasn't.

Martin said, 'That man there was his master?'

'Most likely,' agreed Baru. 'See the black leather armour and coif. In his pack you should find an iron mask, with leather bands for the head, so he can wear it over the coif. My father had such in his lodge, a reminder of the past handed down from our ancestors.' He glanced about and sighted something over by the fallen trolls. 'There, fetch that.'

Locklear ran over and came back with a giant crossbow. He handed it over to Martin, who whistled aloud. 'That's the damndest thing.'

"It's half again the size of the heaviest crossbow I've ever seen,' remarked Roald.

Baru nodded in agreement. "It is called a Bessy Mauler. Why it is named after Bessy is not known, but it is indeed a mauler. My people used to employ a Beasthunter at every village, to protect the herds from lions, cave bears, griffins, and other predators. When the Kingdom came to Yabon, and your nobles built cities and castles, and your patrols rode out and pacified the countryside, the need for a Beasthunter lessened, then died out. The Beasthounds were also allowed to diminish in size, bred as pets and to hunt smaller game.'

Martin put down the crossbow. He examined a quarrel the man had in a hip quiver. It was steel-tipped and twice the size of a normal bolt. 'This looks like it would punch a hole through a castle wall.'

Baru smiled slightly. 'Not quite, but it will put a dent the size of your fist in a wyvern's scales. It might not kill the wyvern, but it would make him think twice about raiding a herd.'

Arutha said, 'But you say there are no more Beasthunters.'

Baru patted the dog on the head and stood. 'Or so it was supposed. Yet there lies one.' He was silent for a long moment. 'When the Kingdom came to Yabon, we were a loose association of clans, and we were divided on our treatment of your people. Some of us welcomed your ancestors, some did not. For the most part, we Hadati kept to our old ways, living in the highlands and herding our sheep and cattle. But those in the towns quickly were absorbed as your countrymen came in increasing numbers, until there was little difference between Yabon city men and those of the Kingdom. Laurie and Roald are born of such stock. So Yabon became Kingdom. "But some resented the Kingdom, and resistance

became open war. Your soldiers came in numbers, and the rebellion was quickly crushed. But there is a story, not well believed, that some chose neither to bow before the King nor fight. Rather they chose to flee, going north to new homes beyond the control of the Kingdom.' Martin regarded the dog. 'Then it may be the story is true.'

'So it seems,' said Baru. "I think I have distant kin out here somewhere.'

Arutha studied the dog for a moment. "And we find allies. These trolls were Murmandamus's servants, certainly, and this man was their foeman.'

'And the enemy of our enemy is our ally,' said Roald.

Baru shook his head. "Remember, these people fled the Kingdom. They may have little love yet for you, Prince. We may be exchanging one trouble for another.' The last was added with a wry smile.

Arutha said, 'We have no choice. Until we know what lies beyond these mountains, we must seek out whatever aid chance brings us.' He permitted a brief pause while the body of the fallen Beasthunter was covered, with rocks, forming a rude cairn. The dog stood stoically while this was being done. When it was finished, the dog refused to move, laying his head upon his master's grave. 'Do we leave him?' asked Roald.

'No,' answered Baru. Again he spoke in the odd tongue, and reluctantly the dog came to his side. 'The

language used to command our dogs must be still the same, for he obeys.'

'How, then, do we proceed?' asked Arutha.

"With caution, but I think it best to let him lead us,' the hillman answered indicating the dog. He spoke a single word, and the dog's ears perked and he began

trotting up the trail, waiting at the limit of their vision for them to follow. Quickly they mounted and Arutha said, 'What did you say?'

Baru said, "I said "home". He will lead us to his people.

9

## Captives

The wind howled.

The riders pulled cloaks tightly about themselves. They had been following the Beasthound for more than a week. Two days after finding the dog they had passed over the crest of the Great Northern Mountains. Now they moved along a narrow trail just below a high ridge, running toward the northeast. The dog had come to accept Baru as his master, for he obeyed every command the Hadati gave, while he ignored any spoken by the others. Baru called the dog Blutark, which he said meant, in the old Hadati tongue, an old friend rediscovered or come back from a long journey. Arutha hoped it was a favourable omen, and that those who bred the dog would feel similarly toward Arutha's company. Twice the dog had proven useful, signalling dangers along the trail. He could smell what even Baru and Martin's hunters' eyes missed. Both times they had surprised goblins camped along the trail. It was clear that Murmandamus controlled this route into the Northlands. Both encounters had taken place at junctions with trails clearly heading downward.

The trail had run southeasterly from Inclindel, then turned east, hugging the north side of the mountain ridges. In the distance they could see the vast reaches of the Northlands, and they wondered. To most men of the Kingdom, "the Northlands" was a convenient label for that unknown place the other side of the mountains, the nature of which could only be speculated upon. But now they could see the Northlands below them, and the reality of the place dwarfed any speculation, for it was an amense reality. To the northwest a vast plain stretched away into the distant mists, the Thunderhell. Few men of the Kingdom had ever trod upon that grassy domain, and then only with the consent of the nomads who called the Thunderhell home. At the eastern edge of the Thunderhell a range of hills rose, and beyond were lands never seen by men of the Kingdom. Each turn in the road, each jog in the trail, and a new vista opened before

them ;

That the dog refused to descend caused them concern, for Martin avowed they would have more cover in the hills below than upon this open trail. Weaving along the north ridges of the mountains, they only now and then descended below the timberline. Upon three occasions they had noticed indications that this trail was not entirely natural, as if someone had once, long ago, undertaken to connect sections of it.

Not for the first time, Roald remarked, "That hunter wandered quite a distance from home, that's for certain.' they were easily a hundred miles to the east of where they had found the body.

Baru said, 'Yes, and that is a strange thing, for the Beasthunters were given the defence of an area. Perhaps he had been pursued for some time by those trolls.' But he knew, as did the others, that such a pursuit would be a "matter of miles, not tens of miles. No, there was another reason that hunter had been so far from his home.

To pass the time, Arutha, Martin, and the boys had undertaken to learn Baru's Hadati dialect, against the day of meeting BIUtark's owner's kin. Laurie and Roald spoke fluent Yabonese and a smattering of the Hadati patois already, so it came quickly to them. Jimmy had the most difficulty, but he was able to make simple sentences.

Then Blutark came bounding back down the trail, his stubby tail wagging furiously. In atypical behaviour he barked loudly, and spun in place. Baru said, "It is strange.

The dog normally went on point when sensing danger, until he was attacked or ordered to attack by Baru. Baru and Martin rode past the others, the Hadati ordering the dog forward. Blutark dashed ahead, around a bend between high walls of stone, as the trail cut downward again.

They rounded the turn and pulled up, for in a clearing Blutark faced another Beasthound. The two dogs sniffed at each other and wagged tails. But behind the second dog stood a man in black leather armour, an odd iron mask over his face. He sighted at them down a Bessy Mauler, mounted upon a single long wooden pole. He spoke, the words made unintelligible by the blowing wind.

Baru raised his hands and shouted something, most of the words lost upon the others, but his friendly intentions were clear. Suddenly, from above, nets descended, ens'naring all seven riders. A dozen brown-leather-clad soldiers leaped down upon them, and quickly wrestled Arutha's party from their mounts. In short order all seven were



trussed up like game birds. The man in black armour broke down his pole, folding it, and slung it with the crossbow across his back. He approached and gave his own dog and Blutark both friendly pats.

The sound of horses accompanied another detachment of men, in brown, this time riders. One of the men in brown spoke to them, in heavily accented King's Tongue. He said, "You will come with us. Do not speak aloud, or we will gag you. Do not try to escape, or we will kill you."

Baru nodded curtly to his companions, but Roald began to say something. Instantly hands jammed a gag into his mouth and tied a cloth over his face, silencing him. Arutha looked about, but only nodded to the others. The captives were roughly placed back in their saddles, their feet tied to their stirrups. Without further words the riders turned back down the trail, leading Arutha and the others along.

For a day and a night they rode. Short halts were ordered to rest the horses. While the horses were being tended, Arutha and his companions would have their bindings loosened to lessen the cramping they were all experiencing. A few hours after they had set out, Roald's gag was removed, much to his relief, but it was clear their captors wouldn't permit them to speak.

After dawn they could see they had negotiated nearly half the distance between the trail along the crest of the mountains and the foothills below. They passed a small herd of cattle, with three watchful and armed herdsmen who waved, and approached a walled hill community. The outer wall was sturdy, heavy logs lashed together and sealed with dried mud. The horsemen were forced to make a circular approach by deep trenches about the wall, coming up the hill on a switchback trail. On both sides of the trail the trenches revealed fire-hardened wooden spikes, ready to impale any horseman who faltered. Roald looked about and whispered, "They must have some charming neighbours."

One of the guards immediately rode in next to him, the gag ready, but the leader waved him back as they approached the gate. The gate swung open, and they discovered a second wall behind the first. There was no barbican, but the entire area between the walls was effectively a killing ground. As they passed through the second gate, Arutha admired the simple craftsmanship. A modern army could take this village quickly, but it would cost lives. Bandits and goblins would be repulsed easily. Inside the walls, Arutha observed his surroundings. It

was a village of no more than a dozen huts, all of wattle-and-daub

construction. In the compound, children played, but with serious eyes. They wore gambeson armour or, in the case of a few of the older children, leather. All carried daggers. Even the old men were armed, and one hobbled past using a spear instead of a walking staff. The leader of the company said, "Now you may speak, for the rules of the trail do not apply here." He continued to speak King's Tongue. His men cut the straps binding the captives' feet to the stirrups and helped them dismount. He then motioned for them to enter a hut.

Inside, Arutha and the others faced the commander of the patrol. Blutark, who had continued to run at Baru's side, lay at the Hadati's feet, his large tongue lolling out as he panted.

"That dog is a rare breed, of particular importance to our people," said the commander of the patrol. "How do you come to have him!"

Arutha nodded to Baru. "We found his master killed by trolls," said the Hadati. "We killed the trolls and the dog chose to come with us."

The man considered. "Had you harmed his master that dog would have killed you or died in the attempt. So I must believe you. But that breed is trained to obey only a few. How do you command?"

The hillman spoke a word and the dog sat up, ears perked. He spoke another and the dog lay down, at rest. "My village had dogs of similar breed, though not so large as this."

The commander's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"I am Baru, called the Serpentslayer, of Ordwinson's family of the Iron Hills Clan. I am Hadati." He spoke in the Hadati patois as he loosened his long bedroll and removed his tartan and swords.

"The commander nodded. He answered in a language similar enough to Baru's that the others could understand.

The differences between the two languages seemed mainly to be pronunciation and otherwise trivial.

"It has been many years since one of our Hadati kin has come over the mountains, Baru Serpentslayer, nearly a generation. This explains much. But men of the Kingdom usually come here to cause mischief and of late we've had more than our share of such men. I think you other than renegades, but this is a matter for the Protector's wisdom." He rose. "We shall rest here tonight, then tomorrow we shall depart. Food will be brought. There is a bucket for night soil in the corner. Do not leave this hut. Should you attempt it, you will be bound, should you resist, killed."

As he reached the door, Arutha asked, "Where are you taking us?"

The man looked back. 'Armengar.'

At first light they rode out, heading downward out of the highlands into a heavy forest, Blutark loping along easily beside Baru's horse. Their captors again instructed them not to speak, but their weapons had been returned. To Arutha it seemed their captors assumed they would act as comrades on the road should trouble start. As the only likely encounters would be with Murmandamus's serants, Arutha thought it a safe assumption. It was clear the forest had been logged in places, and the path seemed one used regularly. Coming out of a stand of woods, they passed a meadow where a small herd of cattle grazed, with three men standing watch. One was the Beasthunter, who had left the village the night before. The others were herdsmen, but each was armed with a spear, sword, and shield.

Twice more that day, they passed herds, one of cattle, one of sheep. All were tended by warriors, several of whom were women. They came at sundown to another village and were given a place to stay, again with instructions not to leave the building.

The morning of the next day, the fourth of their captivity, they entered a shallow canyon, following a river out of the mountains. They paralleled its course until past noon, then came to a long rise. The road circled around a large hill rather than follow the river, which cut its way through the rock, so their view of all below them was blocked for nearly an hour. When they cleared the hill, Arutha and his friends all exchanged glances in silent wonder.

The leader of the party, who they had learned was called Dwyne, turned and said, "Armengar."

The city could not be seen in detail, but what could be seen was staggering. The outer wall was a full fifty or sixty feet high. Bartizans atop the wall were placed every fifty feet or so, allowing overlapping fields of fire for archers placed in them. As they closed upon the wall, more details emerged. The barbican was immense, fully a hundred feet across. The gates seemed more like movable sections of the wall than gates. The river they had followed out of the mountains became a moat that flowed along the wall, not giving more than a foot of ground between its bank and the base of the wall.

As they approached the city, the gates opened with surprising swiftness given their ponderous appearance, and a company of riders appeared from within. They rode at good pace toward Arutha's escorts. As the two companies passed, the riders of each raised right hands in salute. Arutha saw they were attired in identical fashion. Men and women both wore leather coifs over their

heads. Their armour was leather or chain, with no plate in view. Each wore a sword and carried a shield, and spears and bows appeared in equal proportion. There were no tabards or devices upon shields. Soon they were past, and Arutha's attention returned to the city. They were crossing a bridge, which appeared to be permanent, over the moat.

As they entered the city gate, Arutha caught a glimpse of a banner flying from an outer corner of the barbican. He could discern only its colours, gold and black, not its markings, but something about that banner caused him to feel an instant's disquiet. Then the outer gates were closing. They seemed to swing shut of their own accord, and Martin said, 'There must be some mechanism that moves them from within the walls.' Arutha only watched silently. 'You could have a full hundred, hundred fifty horsemen sally forth without opening the inner gates,' said Martin as he regarded the size of the killing ground in the barbican. Arutha nodded. It was the largest he had ever seen. The walls seemed an impossible thirty feet thick. Then the inner gates swung open and they entered Armengar.

The city was separated from the walls by a bailey a hundred yards wide. Then began a tightly packed array of buildings, shot through with narrow streets. There was nothing like the broad boulevards of Krondor in sight, and no signs upon any building betraying its purpose. They followed their escort and noticed that few people loitered about the doorways. If there were businesses there, they were not apparent to Arutha's companions. Everywhere they looked, the people walked in armour and wore weapons. Only once did they see an exception to the armour, a woman obviously in the late stages of pregnancy, yet her belt sash held a dagger. Even children who looked above the age of seven or eight were under arms.

The streets twisted and turned, intercepting others at random intervals. "This city seems without plan," said Locklear.

Arutha shook his head. "It is a city with great plan, a clear purpose. Straight streets benefit merchants and are easy to build, if the terrain is flat or easily worked. You see twisting streets only where it is too difficult to cut straight ones, such as in Rillanon, which is situated upon rocky hills, or near the palace in Krondor. This city is built upon a plateau, which means these meandering streets are intentional. Martin, what do you think?"

"I think that should the walls be breached, you could place an ambush every fifty feet from here to the other end of the city." He pointed upward. "Notice every building is of equal height. I warrant the roofs are flat

and accessible from within. A perfect place for archers. Look at the lower floor."

Jimmy and Locklear looked and saw what the Duke of Crydee meant. Each building had only a single door on the ground floor, heavy wood with iron bands, and there were no windows. Martin said, "This is a city designed for defence."

Dwyne turned and said, 'You are perceptive.' He then returned his attention to their passage through the city. Citizens watched for a moment while the strangers rode by, then went back to their business.

They emerged from the press of buildings into a market. Everywhere they looked, booths were placed and people moved about them, buying and selling. Arutha said, 'Look,' as he pointed toward a citadel. It seemed to grow from the very face of a gigantic cliff, against which the city was nestled. It rose up a full thirty stories high. Another wall, thirty feet in height, circled the citadel, and around the wall another moat. Jimmy looked and said~ "They must expect some bad company." 'Their neighbours tend to be an irksome lot,' commented Roald.

At that a few of the guards who understood the Kingdom language laughed openly, nodding agreement. Arutha said, "If the booths come down, we ride across another bailey, giving those on the walls an open field of fire. Taking this city would cost a fortune in lives."

Dwyne said, 'As it was meant to.'

They entered the citadel and were ordered to dismount, and their horses were led away. They followed Dwyne down to a dungeon, though it seemed clean and fairly spacious. They were shown to a large common cell, illuminated by a brass lantern. Dwyne motioned they should enter. He said, "You shall wait here. If you hear an alarm, come to the common court above and you will be told what to do. Otherwise, wait here until the Protector sends for you. I will have 'food sent down.'" With that he left.

Jimmy looked about and said, "They don't lock the door or take our weapons?"

Baru sat down. "Why bother?"

Laurie heaved himself across an old blanket placed upon straw. "We certainly can't go anywhere. We can't pretend to be native to this city, and we couldn't hide. And I'm not about to fight my way out of here."

Jimmy sat down next to Laurie. "You're right. So what do we do now?"

Arutha removed his sword. 'We wait.'

For hours they waited. Food was brought and they ate. When the meal was finished, Dwyne returned. 'The

Protector approaches. I would know your names and your purpose.'

All eyes turned to Arutha, who said, "I think we gain nothing by hiding\_ the truth, and may gain something if we are forthright.' He said to Dwyne, "I am Arutha, Prince of Krondor.'

Dwyne said, 'That is a title?'

"Yes,' Arutha said.

"We remember little of the Kingdom, we of Armengar,

nor do we have such titles. It is important?'

Roald nearly burst. "Damn it, man, he's brother to the King, as is Duke Martin here. He's the second most powerful lord in the Kingdom.'

Dwyne seemed unimpressed. He was given the others' names, then he asked, "Your purpose?'

Arutha said, "I think we shall wait to speak of this with your Protector.' Dwyne seemed not in the least offended by the answer and left.

Another hour went by, and then the door Rew open.

Dwyne entered, a blond man a step behind. Arutha looked up expectantly, for perhaps this was the Protector. This was the first man they had seen not attired in brown armour. He was dressed in a long coat of chain over a red, knee-length gambeson. A chain coif had been thrown back, leaving his head uncovered. He wore his hair cut short and was clean-shaven. His face was one that would have been counted open and friendly by most, but there was a hardness around the eyes as he regarded the captives. He said nothing, simply looking from face to face. He studied Martin. as if noting something familiar in him. Then he looked at Arutha. For a long minute he stared at the Prince, his eyes betraying no reaction. With a single nod to Dwyne he turned and left.

Martin said, 'There's something about that one

Arutha said, "What!'

"I don't know how, but I could swear I've seen him before. And he wore a blazon upon his breast, though I couldn't make it out through the chain.'

A short time later the door opened again. Whoever stood before it remained outside, only his silhouette visible. Then a familiar, ear-shattering bellow of a laugh erupted and the man stepped forward. 'I'll be the son of a saint! It is true,' he said, a broad grin splitting his grey- shot beard.

Arutha, Martin, and Jimmy all sat staring up in disbelief. Arutha rose slowly, not able to trust his senses. Before him stood the last man he had expected to see entering this cell. Jimmy jumped up and said, 'Amos!'

Amos Trask, onetime pirate, and companion to Arutha and Martin during the Riftwar, stepped into the cell. The burly sea captain engulfed Arutha in a bear hug, then did the same for Martin and Jimmy. He was quickly introduced to the others. Arutha said, 'How did you get here?'

'That's a tale, son, one with great sagas, but not for now. The Protector is expecting the pleasure of your company, and he's not given to be kept waiting gracefully. We can exchange histories after. For the moment you and Martin must come with me. The others are to wait here.'

Martin and Arutha followed Amos down the hall and up the stairs to the courtyard. He quickly crossed to the citadel's main building and began to hurry. "I can't tell you much, except we must hurry," he said as he reached an odd platform in some sort of tower. He motioned them to stand beside him. He pulled on a rope and suddenly the platform was rising.

'What's this?' inquired Martin.

'A hoisting platform, a lift. We need to carry heavy missiles to the catapults on the roof. It's powered by some horses on a winch below. It also keeps a fat former sea captain from having to dash up twenty-seven courses of stairs. My wind's not what it once was, lads.' His tone turned serious. 'Now, listen. I know you've a hundred questions, but they must go begging for the moment. I'll explain everything after you speak to One-eye.'

"The Protector?" asked Arutha.

(That's him. Now, I don't know how to tell you, but you're in for a shock. I want you to keep your temper in check until you and I can sit and talk. Martin, keep a close line on the lad.' He put his hand upon Arutha's shoulder and leaned close. 'Shipmate, remember, here you are not a prince. You're a stranger, and with these people that usually means crowbait. Strangers are rare and seldom welcomed in Armengar.'

The lift halted and they got off. Amos hurried down a long corridor. Along the left wall was a series of vaulted windows, providing an unobstructed view of the city and the plain beyond. Martin and Arutha could only afford a quick glance at the vista but it was impressive. They hurried as Amos turned and motioned for them to keep up. The blond man was waiting for them before a door. 'Why didn't you say anything?' he asked Amos in a harsh whisper. Jerking his thumb toward the door, Amos said, 'He

wanted a full report from you. You know how he can be. Nothing personal until business is finished. He doesn't show it, but he's taking it hard.'

The blond man nodded, his face a grim mask. "I can scarcely believe it. Gwynnath dead. It's a heavy blow to us all.' He had removed the chain mail coat. Upon his gambeson, over his heart, was a small red and gold deYice, but he turned away and passed through the door before Arutha could comprehend the particulars of that crest. Amos said, "The Protector's patrol was ambushed and some people died. He's in a rare foul mood, for he blames himself, so tread lightly. Come, he'll have my ears if we wait any longer.'

Amos pushed open the door and motioned for the brothers to enter. They were in a conference chamber of some sort, a large round table dominating the room. Against the far wall a massive fireplace sent forth warmth and light. Many maps covered the walls, save the left wall, which had more of the large windows, and overhead a circular candle holder provided more light. Before the fireplace stood the blond man speaking with another, who wore all black, from tunic to trousers to the chain he still hadn't removed. His clothing was covered in dust and his face was dominated by , a large black patch over his left eye. His hair was grey and black in equal proportion, but his carriage showed nothing of age. For an instant Arutha was struck by a certain resemblance. He glanced at Martin, who returned the look. He saw it as well. More in bearing and manner than in physical appearance, this man resembled their father.

Then the man stepped forward, and Arutha could see clearly the blazon upon his tabard. A golden eagle spread his wings upon a sable field. Arutha knew the cause of the discomfort he had felt at glimpsing the flag atop the gate. Only one man in the world wore that crest. He was once counted the finest general in the Kingdom, then branded traitor by the King as being responsible for the death of Anita's father. Here was their own father's most hated enemy. The man called Protector by the men of Armengar waved toward a pair of seats. His Yoice was deep and commanding, though his words were spoken softly. "Won't you be seated . . . cousins?' asked Guy du Bas-Tyra.

Arutha's hand tightened upon the hilt of his sword an instant, but he said nothing as he and Martin sat. His mind reeled as a hundred questions crashed together. Finally he said, 'How -?'

Guy interrupted him as he took a chair. "It is a long story, I'll leave it to Amos to tell you. I have other concerns for the moment.' A strange, pained look was briefly revealed. He turned away for an instant, then back to the brothers. He studied Martin. 'You look a



little like Borric did when young, do you know that?' Martin nodded. Guy said to Arutha, 'You favour him somewhat, but

you also look like . . . your mother. The shape of the eyes . . . if not the colour.' He said the last softly. Then his tone shifted as a soldier brought in mugs and ale. 'We have no wine in Armengar, the making of it is a lost art here, as the climate is ill suited for grape arbours. But they do make stout ale, and I'm thirsty. Join me if you wish.' He poured himself a mug and let Arutha and Martin serve themselves. Guy drained his mug, and for a moment his mask fell again and he said, 'Gods, I'm tired.' Then he looked at the brothers. 'Well then, when Armand reported who Dwyne had fetched in, I could scarcely believe my ears. Now my eyes bear witness.' Arutha's gaze flicked to where the tall blond man hovered by the fire. 'Armand?' He studied the blazon, a shield bend dexter, with a crouching red dragon, chief on field gold, and an upraised lion's claw in gold upon a field red. Martin said, 'Armand de Sevigny' The man inclined

his head toward the Duke.

'Baron of Gyldenholt? Marshal of the Knights of St Gunther?' wondered Arutha.

Martin swore. 'I'm an idiot. I knew I had seen him. He was at the palace in Rillanon in the days before you joined us, Arutha. But he was not there the day of the coronation, the day you arrived.'

The blond man smiled slightly. 'At your service

Highness.

'Not, as I recall. You were not among those who swore fealty to Lyam.'

The blond man shook his head. 'True.' His expression seemed almost one of regret.

Guy said, 'Again, part of the story of how we came here. For the moment, I need concern myself with why you are here, and if that reason poses any threat to this city. Why did you come north?'

Arutha sat silently, his arms crossed before him, studying du Bas-Tyra through narrowed eyes. 'He was off balance from finding Guy du Bas-Tyra in control of this city. He hesitated in answering the question. The importance of finding Murmandamus might in some way run counter to what Guy saw as his best interests. And, Arutha was suspicious of anything involving Guy. Guy had most openly plotted to seize the throne for himself, almost precipitating a civil war. Anita's father had died by his order. Du Bas-Tyra was everything Arutha had been taught to dislike and mistrust by his father. He was a true eastern lord, shrewd, cunning, and well practised

in the subtleties of intrigue and treachery. Of de Seigny Arutha knew little, save he had been numbered among the most capable rulers in the East, but he was Guy's vassal and always had been. And while the Prince liked and trusted Amos, Trask had been a pirate and was not above lawbreaking. No, there was ample reason for caution.

Martin watched Arutha, waiting for an answer. The prince's manner was truculent to all outward appearances, but that was only what the others in the room saw. Martin knew that his brother was wrestling with the unanticipated shock of the moment and the desire that nothing interfere with his mission to find and kill Murmandamus. Martin glanced around the room and could see that Amos and Armand both seemed concerned at the lack of a quick response from Arutha.

When no answer was forthcoming, Guy slammed his hand down on the table. 'Play not with my patience, Arutha.' He pointed his finger. "You are not a prince in this city. In Armengar only one voice commands, and that voice is mine!' He sat back, his face flushed behind the black eye patch. Softening his voice, he said, "I . . . mean no rudeness. I have my mind on other things.' He lapsed into thoughtful silence while he stared at them for a long time. At last he said, "I have no idea what you are doing here, Arutha, but something of the oddest nature is dictating your choices, or you didn't learn a damn thing from your father. The Prince of Krondor and two of the most powerful dukes in the Kingdom, Salador and Crydee, riding into the Northlands with a mercenary, a Hadati hillman, and two boys? Either you're totally without wit or you're clever far beyond my understanding.'

Arutha remained silent, but Martin said, 'There have been changes since you were last in the Kingdom, Guy.' Guy again lapsed into silence. "I think there is a story here I need to know. I cannot promise you aid, but I think our purposes may prove compatible.' He said to Amos, 'Find them better quarters and feed them,' and to Arutha, "I'll give you until the morning. But when we speak next, do not again tempt my patience. I must know what brought you here. It is vital. You may seek me out before tomorrow if you decide to speak.' His voice again became heavy with some emotion. "I should be here most of the night.'

With a wave he indicated that Amos was to lead them away. Arutha and Martin followed the seaman out of the hall, and Amos halted once the door was closed. He looked at Arutha and Martin for a long moment. 'For a couple of bright lads, you both did right well in showing how to be stupid.'

Amos wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He belched and then stuffed another slice of bread and cheese 'into his mouth. 'Then what?'

'Then,' answered Martin, 'when we got back, Anita had Arutha's pledge within an hour and Carline and Laurie were betrothed not long after.'

'Ha! Remember that first night out of Krondor aboard the Sea Swift? You told me your brother was a hooked fish - never stood a chance.'

Arutha smiled at the remark. They were all sitting around a large basket of food and a hogshead of ale, in a spacious room in a suite given over to their use. There were no servants - food had been brought by soldiers and they served themselves. Baru scratched absently at Blutark's ear while the dog chewed on a joint of beef. No one had seemed concerned about the Beasthound's staying with the Hadati. Then Arutha said, "Amos, we've been chatting for a half hour. Will you tell us what's going on? How in the world did you get here?'

Amos looked about. "What's going on is you're prisoners, of sorts, and so you'll stay until One-eye changes things. Now, I've seen my share of cells, and this is the nicest I've ever seen.' With a sweep of his hand he indicated the large and spacious room. "No, if you've a mind to be in prison, this here's a good one.' His eyes narrowed. "But don't lose sight it is a prison, laddie. Look, Arutha. I spent enough years with you and Martin here to know something about you. I don't remember you being such a suspicious lot, so I expect some things over the last two years have caused you to trim sails that way. But here you've got to live, breathe, and eat trust, or you're dead. Do you understand me?'

"No,' answered the Prince. 'Just what do you mean?'

Amos thought a long moment, then said, 'This is a city of people surrounded by nothing but enemies. Trust of your neighbour is a way of life if you want to keep breathing.' He paused and considered. "Look, I'll tell you how we came here and then maybe you'll understand. ' Amos settled back, poured himself another mug of

ale and began his story. cWell, the last I saw you two was as I was sailing out of the harbour aboard your brother's ship.' Martin and Arutha both smiled in remembrance.

'Now, if you'll recall, you had everyone in the city out looking for Guy. You didn't find him, because he was hiding somewhere no one thought to look.'

Martin's eyes opened in wonder, one of the few unguarded reactions any of those in the room had ever seen in him. 'On the King's ship!'

'When he heard King Rodric had named Lyam the Heir, Guy cut from Krondor and ran for Rillanon. He had hopes of seeing something of his plans salvaged when the Congress of Lords met to ratify the succession. By the time Lyam got to Rillanon, enough of the eastern lords had gathered for Guy to judge the lay of the land. It was clear Lyam would be King - this was before anyone knew about you, Martin - so Guy resigned himself to being tried for treason. Then, the morning of the convocation and coronation, word came about Martin's being legitimized, so Guy waited to see what would happen later that afternoon.'

'Waiting to seize the moment,' commented Arutha. 'Don't be so quick to judge,' snapped Amos, then he continued in softer tones. 'He was worried over a civil war and if it came, he was ready to fight. But while he waited to see what would happen, he knew Caldric's men were out snooping about. He had been dodging them barely, a couple of times. Guy still had friends in the capital, and some of them smuggled him and Armand aboard the Royal Swallow - gad, what a pretty craft she was - just about the time the Ishapian priests reached the palace to start up the coronation. Anyway, when I . . . borrowed the ship, we discovered we had passengers. 'Now, I was ready to toss Guy and Armand over the

side, or turn about and deliver them trussed up to you, but Guy can be a convincing enough rogue in his way, so I agreed to take him to Bas-Tyra, in exchange for a healthy price.'

'So he could plot against Lyam?' asked Arutha incredulously.

'Damn it, boy,' bellowed Amos, 'I let you out of my

sight for a pissing two years and you go and get downright thick-headed on me.' Looking at Martin, he said, 'Must be the company you've been keeping.' Martin said to his brother, 'Let him finish.'

'No, it wasn't to plot treason. It was so he could put his aHairs in order. He figured Lyam'd ordered his head, so he was going to tidy up some things, then I was going to bring him back to Rillanon, so he could give himself uP.'

Arutha looked stunned.

'About the only thing he really wanted was to get pardon for Armand and his other followers. Anyway, we reached Bas-Tyra and stayed a few days. Then came word of the banishment. Guy and I had become a little more friendly by then, so we talked and made another deal. He wanted to leave the Kingdom, to seek a place. He's a fine general, and there are many who would have

given him service, especially Kesh, but he wanted to go someplace so remote he would never have to face Kingdom soldiers in the field. We figured to head east, then turn south, and make for the Keshian Confederacy. We might have made a name for ourselves down there. He was going to be a general and I thought I'd take a bash at being an admiral. We had a spot of trouble with Armand, for Guy wanted to send him back home to fealty to Guy, years before, and as he had not sworn to Lyam he'd not quit his liege lord's service. Damnedest argument I've ever heard. Anyway, he's still with us. So we set sail for the Confederacy.

cBut three days out of Bas-Tyra, a' fleet of Ceresian

pirates took out after us. I'd be 'willing to take on two, even three of the bastards, but five? The Swallow was a fast lady, but the pirates stayed right on her heels. For four days it was all clear skies, unlimited visibility, and fair winds. For Kingdom Sea pirates, they were a canny lot. They spread out across each following quarter, so I couldn't lose them at night. Each night I'd sail around, this way and that, then come morning, there'd be five sails on the horizon. They were like lampreys. I couldn't shake them. Then we hit weather. A line squall came roaring out of the west, driving us east for a day and a half, then a full gale blew up carrying us north along uncharted coast. The only good thing about that storm is we shook loose of the Ceresians at last. By the time I found safe harbour, we were in waters I'd never heard of, let alone seen.

cWe lay up and took stock. The ship was in need of

some repair, not serious enough to sink her, but enough to make sailing damned inconvenient. I took her up a big river, must have been somewhere east of the Kingdom proper.

'Well, the second night we were at anchor, a damn army of goblins swarmed the ship, killing the sentries and capturing the rest of us. Bastards Rred the Swallow and burned her down to the waterline. Then they marched us to a camp in the woods where some Dark Brothers were waiting. They took charge of us and we were all marched north.

'The lads I'd recruited were a crusty lot, but most of them died on the march. Damn goblins didn't care spit. We got almost nothing to eat, and if a man took sick and couldn't walk, they killed him on the spot. I got a touch of the belly flux and Guy and Armand carried me for two days, and believe me that wasn't pleasant for any of us. .We moved northwest, heading up into the mountains, then over them. Lucky for us it was late summer, or we'd

all'have frozen to death. Still, it was touch and go. Then we met ' with some other Dark Brothers with more prisoners. Most of the prisoners spoke an odd tongue, a lot like Yabonese, but a few others spoke the King's Tongue, or languages from the eastern kingdoms.

"Twice more we joined with other bands of Brothers with human prisoners, all marching west. I lost track of the'time, but we must have travelled for over two months by then. By the time we were ready to cross the plain - which I now know to be the plain of Isbandia, it was' starting to snow. I know where we were headed now, though then I didn't. Murmandamus was gathering slaves at Sar-Sargoth to pull his siege machines.

"Then one night our guards were hit by a company of

horsemen from here. Of the two hundred or so slaves, only twenty survived, for the goblins and Dark Brothers took to killing us as soon as the horsemen struck the camp. Guy strangled one with his chains as it tried to run me through with a sword. I picked up the sword and killed another just after it clawed the Protector's eye out. Armand was wounded but not quite enough to kill him. He's a tough bastard. But we three and two others were the only survivors from the Swallow.

'From there we were brought here.'

Arutha said, "An incredible tale.' He sat back against the wall. 'Still, these are incredible 'times.'

Martin said, 'How is it an outlander caine to rule here?'

' Amos took another drink. 'These are a strange folk, Martin. As honest and fine as you'll find anywhere, in some ways, but they're as alien as those Tsurani in other ways. They have no hereditary rank here, instead placing great store in ability. Within a few months it was clear Guy was a first-rate general, so they gave him a company to command. Armand and I served under him. Within a few more months it was clear he was by far the best commander they had. They've got nothing like the Congress of Lords here, Arutha. When something needs to be decided, they call everyone into a meeting in the great square, where the market's held. They call the meeting the volksraad, and they all vote. Otherwise, all decisions are left to those elected by the volksraad. They summoned Guy and told him he was now Protector of Armengar. It's like being named the King's Marshal, but also something like being responsible for the safety of the city as well, a chief sheriff, constable, reeve, and bailiff all rolled up in one. '

Arutha said, "What did the previous Protector think of this?' "She must have thought it was a good idea, she

proposed it.'

"She?" said Jimmy. Amos said, "That's another thing around here takes a

bit of getting used to. Women. They're just like men. I mean when it comes to giving and taking orders, voting in the volksraad . . . other things. You'll see.' Amos's expression got distant. "Her name was Gwynnath. She was as fine a woman as I've met. I'm not ashamed to admit I was a little in love with her myself, though' - his tone turned a little lighter - "I'll never settle down. But if I ever did, that's the sort for me.' He looked down into his ale mug. "But she and Guy . . . I know some things about him, learned slowly over the last two years, Arutha. I can't betray a trust. If he tells you himself, fine. But let's say they were something like man and wife there at the end, deeply in love. She was the one to step aside and turn over her city to him. She would have died for him. And he for her. She rode beside him and fought like a lioness.' His voice softened. "She died yesterday.' Arutha and Martin exchanged looks with the others. Baru and Roald remained silent. Laurie thought of Carline and shivered. Even the boys could sense something of the loss Amos felt. Arutha remembered what Amos had said to Armand just before they had met Guy. 'And Guy blames himself.'

"Yes. One-eye's much like any good captain: if it

happened under his command, it's his responsibility.' Amos sat back, his face a thoughtful mask. "The goblins and the Armengarians used to keep things pretty simple for a long time. Run out, break a few heads, then retreat. The Armengarians were a lot like the Tsurani, fierce 'warriors, but no real organization. 'But when Murmandamus showed up, the Brothers got downright organized, even to the company level. Now they can coordinate two, three thousand warriors under a single commander. The Brotherhood was punishing the Armengarians regularly when we showed up. Guy proved a blessing to the Armengarians, knowing modern warcraft. He's trained them, and now they're damn good cavalry and fair mounted infantry, though getting an Armengarian off his horse can be a chore. Still, Guy makes progress. They're back to holding their own with the Brothers. But yesterday. . .' Nobody spoke for a long while.

Martin said, 'We have some serious matters to discuss, Amos. You know we wouldn't be here unless something of the gravest consequence was haphening in the Kingdom.'

"Well, I'll let you alone for a while. You were good companions, and I know you to be honourable men.' He

rose to his feet. 'But one thing more. The Protector is the most powerful man in the city, but even his power is W to matters of safety for Armengar. If he said he'd an old debt with you, no one would interfere while you fought a duel, man to man. If you won, you'd be cut loose to make your own way and no one in the city'd raise a hand against you. But all he has to do is to call you spies and you'd be dead before you turned around. Arutha, Martin, I know there's' bad blood between you and Guy, because of your father, and because of Erland. And I now know some of what lay behind that. I'll leave that for Guy to sort out with you in time. But you must know something of how the weather turns up here. You are free to come and go as long as you don't break a law or as long as Guy doesn't order you tossed out, or hung or whatever. But he takes the responsibility. He guarantees your good behaviour, all of you. If you betray the city, his life is forfeit along with your own. As I said these folk can be fairly strange in their way, and their ways can be harsh. So understand what I say when I tell you this: betray guy's trust, even if you think it's for the good of the Kingdom, and these people will kill you. And I'm not sure I'd even try to stop them.'

'You know we'd not break trust, Amos,' answered Martin.

"I know, but I wanted you to understand how strongly I feel. I'm fond of both you lads, and would dislike seeing your throats cut almost as much as you would.' Saying nothing more, Amos left.

Arutha settled back, considering all 'that Amos had told him, and suddenly realized he was bone-tired. He looked to Martin and his brother nodded. No further discussion was required. Arutha knew he would tell the complete story to Guy in the morning.

Arutha and his companions waited as the lift rose, then halted at the floor of the Protector's council room. It had been late morning, almost noon, before the call to Guy's council had arrived. They walked a short way down the hall, then stopped. The guard who had come for them waited while they stared out the window in wonder at the vista below. Armengar spread out beyond the moat about the citadel and across the open market, to the huge city wall. But beyond the wall they could see a vast plain stretching northeast into the distant mist. On either side of the city the mountains rose high into the heavens. From the west white billowing clouds blew through a deep blue sky, as amber-highlighted green grasses stretched away to the limit of their view. It was an incredible view. Jimmy glanced over and saw a strange expression on Locklear's face. "What?"



"I was just thinking about all that land," he said, pointing toward the plain.  
"What about it?" asked Arutha.  
"You could grow a lot on such land."

Martin let his gaze wander the horizon. "Enough wheat to feed the Western Realm," he commented.  
Jimmy said, "You, a farmer?"  
Locklear grinned. "What do you think a baron does in a small place like Land's End? Mostly he settles -squabbles between farmers, or sets fair taxes on crops. You have to know about such things."

The guard said, "Come, the Protector waits."

As Arutha and his companions entered, Guy looked up. With him were Amos, Dwyne, Armand de Sevigny, and a woman. Arutha looked at his brother and saw that Martin had halted in his tracks. The Duke of Crydee was staring at the woman in unabashed appreciation. Arutha touched Martin's arm and he moved to follow his brother. Arutha glanced at the woman again, and could appreciate his brother's distraction. At first blush, she seemed a plain-looking woman, but as soon as she moved, her bearing added another dimension to her appearance. She was striking. She wore leather armour, brown tunic and trousers, like most of the others in the city. But the bulky covering couldn't disguise the fact she was trimly built, and her carriage was erect, even regal. Her hair was deep brown, with a startling streak of grey at the left temple, and was tied back with a rolled green scarf, and her eyes were blue. And from the red-rimmed state of those eyes, it was clear 'she had been crying. Guy indicated that Arutha and his companions should sit. Arutha introduced everyone, and Guy in turn said, "You know Amos and Armand. This is Briana" - he indicated the woman - "one of my commanders." Arutha nodded, but saw the woman had recovered from whatever had caused her to cry and was returning Martin's appraising look.

quickly, with economy, Arutha told Guy his story, starting with the return from the long trip with Lyam to the East, then of the first attack by the Nighthawks, through the revelations at the Abbey at Sarth and the quest for Silverthorn, to the false death of the Prince of Krondor. He ended by saying, "To end it, we've come to kill Murmandamus."

At that, Guy shook his head in disbelief. "Cousin, it's a bold plan, but. . ." He turned to Armand. "How many infiltrators have we tried to get into his camp?"

"Six?"

"Seven," said Briana.

'But they weren't Kingdom men, were they?' asked Jimmy, taking out an ebon hawk on a chain. "And they didn't carry the Nighthawks' talisman, did they.'

Guy looked at Jimmy in near-exasperation. "Armand?' The former Baron of Gyldenholt opened a drawer in a cabinet and took out a pouch. He untied the pouch and poured a half dozen of the talismans on the table. "We've tried it, Squire. And yes, some were Kingdom men, for there are always a few among those saved by the Armengarians when they raided the Brothers' slave cofRes. No, there's something missing. They know who the true brigands are and who are spies.'

Arutha said, "Magic, most likely.'

Guy said, 'That's a problem we've faced before. We number no spellcasters, whether mBgicians or priests, in .this city. It seems constant warfare, with everyone expected to fight, does not permit the sort of placidity such study requires - or it kills off all the teachers. But whatever the reason, on those few occasions when Murmandamus or his snake has taken a hand, we've paid a dear price.' He added thoughtfully, "Though for some reason he seems reluctant to use his powers against us, thank the gods . '

Guy sat back. 'You and I share an interest, cousin. To give you some sense of it, let me tell you about this place. You know that the ancestors of the Armengarians came over the mountains when the Kingdom annexed Yabon. They discovered a rich land, but one already inhabited, and those who were here first tended to look upon the incursion of the Armengarians with disfavour. Briana, who built this city?'

The woman spoke, her voice a soft contralto. 'The legend is that the gods ordered a race of giants to build this city, then left it abandoned. We took it as we found it.'

'No one knows who lived here,' said Guy. 'There is another city, far to the north, Sar-Sargoth. It is a city twin to this one, and Murmandamus's capital.'

Arutha said, "So if we are to seek him out, there is where we'll find him.'

'Seek him out and he'll see your hbad's on pikes,' snorted Amos.

Guy indicated agreement. 'We have other needs, Arutha. Last year he marshalled an army in excess of twenty thousand. As much might as the Armies of the East at full muster during peaceful times. We braced ourselves for a full-scale onslaught, but nothing materialized. Now, I expect your friend here' - he pointed to Baru - 'killing off Murmandamus's favourite general might have aborted the campaign. But this year he's back and he's even stronger. We estimate he may have morc

than twenty-five thousand goblins and Dark Brothers under his banner, with more arriving every day. I expect upward of thirty thousand when he marches.'

Arutha looked at Guy. "Why hasn't he marched yet?"

Guy spread his hands, inviting comment from anyone.

'He's waiting for your death, remember?' instructed Jimmy. "It's a religious thing."

Arutha said, "He has word by now. That's what he told that renegade Morgan Crowe."

Guy's one good eye narrowed. "What's this?"

Arutha told of the renegade at the inn on the road to Tyr-Sog, and of the plan to hire Segersen's engineers.

"That's what he was waiting for," said Guy, slapping

the table. "He has his magic, but for some reason won't use it against us. Without Segersen's engineers he can't bring down our walls." When Arutha looked uncertain of Guy's meaning, Guy said, "If he could bring down Armengar's walls he wouldn't be trying to hire Segersen. No one knows who built those walls, Arutha, but whoever it was had some skills beyond any other I've knowledge of. I've seen fortification of all manner, but none like Armengar. Segersen's engineers might not be able to breach the walls, but they are the only ones I know of with half a chance to do it."

'So, with Segersen not coming, you're in good position to defend.'

'Yes, but there are other matters coming to bear as well.' Guy stood. 'We've more to discuss, and can continue later; I've a meeting with a city council now. For the present, you are free to come and go within Armengar at will.' He took Arutha aside and said, 'I need to speak with you in private. Tonight, after the evening meal.'

The meeting broke up, with Briana, Armand, and Guy

leaving. Dwyne and Amos lingered behind. Amos approached Arutha and Martin while the Duke watched - the woman leave. 'Who is she, Amos?' asked Martin. 'One of the city's better commanders, Martin. Gwynnath's daughter.'

'Now I understand the look of grief,' said the Duke.

'She just learned of her mother's death this morning.'

Amos pointed toward the city. "Her patrol was to the west, along the line of steadings and kraals, and she just returned hours ago." Martin's expression was quizzical.

'The farm communities are steadings and the cattle- and shepherd communities are kraals. No, she's dealing with Gwynnath's loss. It's Guy who has me worried.'

Arutha said, 'He hides his grief well.'

Arutha felt conflicting emotions. The dislike for Bas-Tyra

he had learned at his father's knee fought his sympathy at the man's grief. He had almost lost Anita, and he could feel that terror and pain echoing as he considered Guy's lot. Yet Guy had ordered Anita's father imprisoned, which had killed him. And Guy was a traitor. Arutha pushed aside those feelings, for they troubled him. He walked with Amos and Martin while Martin continued asking questions about Briana.

10

## Accommodation

Jimmy poked Locklear in the ribs.

They were strolling through the market, attempting to see what little of Armengar was worth seeing. Boys their own age were rare, and those few who they did see were armed and armoured. What interested Jimmy was the differences between this market and those in Krondor.

'We've been here an hour or more, and I'll swear I've not seen a beggar or thief in the lot,' said Jimmy.

'Makes sense,' said Locklear. 'From what Amos said, trust is essential to the existence of this city. No thieves, 'cause they all have to hang together, and where would you hide anyway? I don't know much about cities and such, but it seems to me this place is more a garrison than a city, despite its size.'

'You have that right enough.' 'And there are no beggars because they probably take care of everyone, like in the army.'

'Mess and infirmaries?'

'Yes,' agreed Locklear.

They wandered past booths and Jimmy judged the worth of the items displayed. 'Notice any real luxuries?' Locklear indicated he had not. The booths were devoted to foodstuffs, simple cloth and leather goods, and weapons. All prices were low, and there seemed little if any haggling. After a short time of walking, Jimmy sat on a door

stoop at the edge of the market. "This is boring.

'I see something that's not boring.'

Jimmy said, 'What?'

'Girls.' Locklear pointed. Two girls had emerged from the press of shoppers and were examining goods at a booth near the edge of the market. They appeared about the same age as the boys. Both were similarly attired. leather boots, trousers, tunics~ leather overvests, belt knives. and swords. Each wore a rolled scarf to hold her shoulder-length dark hair out of her eyes. The taller girl noticed Jimmy and Locklear watching them and said something to her companion. The second girl regarded the boys while the two whispered, heads together. The

first girl put back the items she had been holding. and she and her friend walked over to Jimmy and Locklear. 'Well?' said the taller, her blue eyes regarding them frankly.

Jimmy got to his feet and was surprised to find the girl almost as tall as he was. 'Well what?' he responded in halting Armengarian.

'You were staring at us.'

Jimmy glanced down at Locklear, who stood. 'is there something wrong with that?' asked the younger boy, who spoke the language better than Jimmy.

The two girls exchanged glances and laughed, little more than giggles. 'it is rude.'

'We're strangers,' ventured Locklear.

The two girls laughed openly at that. 'That is clear. We heard of you. Everyone in Armengar has heard of you.'

Locklear blushed. It only took a moment's thought to realize that he and Jimmy were markedly different in appearance from everyone in sight. The second girl studied Locklear with dark eyes and said, 'Do you stare at girls where you come from?'

With a sudden grin, Locklear said, 'Every chance I get.'

All four laughed. The taller girl said, 'I am Krinsta; this is Bronwynn. We serve in the Tenth Company. We have liberty until tomorrow night.'

Jimmy didn't know the significance of the reference to company, but he said, 'I'm Squire James - Jimmy. This is Squire Locklear.'

'Locky.'

Bronwynn said, 'You have the same name?'

Locklear said, '"Squire" is a title. We are in service to the Prince.'

The girls exchanged questioning looks. Krinsta said, 'You speak of outlandish things we do not understand.'

In a fluid motion, Jimmy slipped his arm inside hers and said, 'Well then, why don't you show us the city and we'll explain our outlandish ways.'

Awkwardly Locklear followed his friend's example, but it wasn't clear who grabbed whose arm first, he or Bronwynn. With girlish laughter, Bronwynn and Krinsta took the

boys in tow and they made their way through the streets of the city.

Martin ate quietly, studying Briana while he listened to the dinner conversation. Arutha's company, except for Jimmy and Locklear, sat around a large table with Guy, Amos, and Briana. Another of Guy's commanders, Gareth, also dined with them. The boys' absence was no cause for alarm, Amos had assured them, for there was

no trouble in the city they could find without the Protector hearing about it at once. And there was no way they could leave the city, even for one as gifted as Jimmy. Arutha was not as sure of that as Amos, but forwent comment. Arutha knew he and Guy would quickly have to come

to an understanding, and he had some sense of what it would be, but he deferred speculation until he heard what Guy had to say in private. Arutha studied the Protector. Guy had fallen into a black mood, which in a strange way reminded Arutha of his father when in a similar frame of mind. Guy had eaten little, but had been steadily drinking for an hour.

Arutha turned his attention to his brother, who had been behaving in a most unusual fashion since morning. Martin could be quiet for long periods of time, a trait they both shared, but since meeting Briana he had become almost mute. She had arrived with Amos in Arutha's suite for the noon meal. and since then Martin hadn't uttered a dozen words to anyone. But over this meal, as over that earlier one, his eyes had spoken volumes, and if Arutha could judge such things, Briana answered. At least, she seemed to spend more time observing Martin than anyone else at the table.

Guy had said little during the course of the evening. If Briana's mother had been anything like her, Arutha understood Guy's loss, for in the short hours he had observed her, he had come to count her a rare woman. He also could understand Martin's being attracted to her. There was nothing pretty about her, but as different as she was from his beloved Anita, there was a powerful appeal in her, a rough, determined quality of competence that was magnetic. She seemed without artifice, and in Arutha's judgment there was something in her manner that suggested her nature was a match for his brother's. Arutha's attention had been focused for a long time upon grave considerations, but he still had a moment for amusement, he judged Martin was quickly sinking in deep waters.

The meal was somewhat strange to Arutha and Martin, for there were no servants in Guy's hall, or in any part of Armengar. Soldiers brought food to the Protector's quarters as a courtesy, but he served himself, as did his guests. Amos had remarked that most nights he and Armand would lug the serving ware back down to the scullery and give a hand washing it. Everyone in the city helped.

When the meal was finished, Amos said, 'I, Gareth and Armand are due to make rounds of the walls. We're spared the scullery this night so we might act the proper hosts. Would you care to join us?' It was a 'general

invitation to all at the table. Roald, Laurie, and Baru asked to join them, the Hadati especially wishing to see more of his distant kin.

Martin rose and, in what appeared a heroic effort for him, said to Briana, "Perhaps the commander would show me the city?" He seemed equally pleased and distressed when she agreed.

Arutha motioned for him to go with the woman, indicating he would stay behind to speak with Guy. Martin hurried out of the hall as Briana led the way. In the long hall that led to the lift, Martin paused to look at the city lights below. A thousand glittering points shone in the sable darkness. 'As often as I pass this way,' said Briana, 'I never tire of the sight.' Martin nodded agreement. 'is your home like Armengar?'

Martin didn't look at her. 'Crydee?' he thought aloud. 'No. My castle is tiny compared to this citadel, and the town of Crydee is but a tenth the size of this city. We have no giant wall about it, nor are all its people constantly under arms. It is a peaceful place, or so it seems now. Before, I used to shun it as much as I could staying in the forests, to hunt and be alone with my thoughts. Or I would go to the tallest tower of my castle and watch the sun set over the ocean. That is the best time of day. In the summer the breeze from off the water cools the heat of day while the sun plays colours across the water. In the winter the towers are draped in white and it seems a storied place. You can see mighty clouds rolling in from the ocean. And even more magnificent are the lightning storms, with flashes and booming thunder, as if the sky were alive.' He looked down and saw her studying him. Suddenly he felt foolish, and smiled slightly, his only sign of embarrassment. 'I ramble.'

'Amos has told me of oceans.' She tilted her head a little, as if considering. 'it seems a strange thing, all that water.' Martin laughed a little, feeling his nervousness diminish.

"it is a strange thing, strange and powerful. I've never liked ships, but I've had to sail them, and after a while you appreciate how beautiful the sea can be. It is like. . . ' He halted, words not coming. 'Laurie should tell you, or Amos. Both have a flair for words I lack.'

She placed her hand upon his arm. 'I would rather hear them from you.' She turned toward the window, her face sculptured by orange torchlight, her hair a black crown in the half-light. She was silent for a long moment and then looked at Martin. 'Are you a good hunter?'

Suddenly Martin was grinning, feeling like a fool. 'Yes, very good.' Both knew there was no false boasting, just as there would be no false modesty. "I am elvertaught and know only one man who may be a fairer

archer than I.'

'I enjoy the hunt but rarely have time, now that I command. Perhaps we may steal away some time and look for game. It is more dangerous here than in your Kingdom, perhaps, for while we hunt, others may be hunting us.'

Coolly Martin said, 'I have dealt with the moredhel before.'

She regarded him frankly. 'You are a strong man, Martin.' Placing her hand upon his arm, she said, 'And I think a good man, as well. I am Briana, daughter of Gwynnath and Gurtman, of the line of Alwynne.' These were formal words, yet there was something else in them, as if somehow she was revealing herself to him, reaching out to him.

'I am Martin, son of Margaret. . .' For the first time in

years he thought of his mother, a pretty serving girl in Duke Brucal's court. ~. . . and Borric, of the line of Dannis, first of the Condoins. I am called Martin Longbow.'

She looked long at his face, as if studying each feature. Her expression changed as she smiled. Martin felt heat burst in his chest at the sight of it. Then she laughed.

"That name suits you, Martin Longbow. You are as tall and powerful as your weapon. Have you a wife?"

Martin spoke softly. 'No. I . . . I had never met anyone . . . I've never had a way with words . . . or women. I've not known many.'

She placed her fingertips on his lips. 'I understand.' Suddenly Martin found her in his arms, her head on his chest, how he didn't know. Gently he held her, as if the slightest motion would cause her to flee. 'I do not know how things are done in your Kingdom, Martin, but Amos says you avoid speaking openly of things we take for granted in Armengar. I do not know if this is such a thing. But I do not wish to be alone this night.' She looked again at his face, and he saw both desire and fear there and understood her needs. Softly, almost inaudibly, she said, "Are you as gentle as you are strong, Martin Longbow?' Martin studied her face and knew no words were

needed. He held her for a long time in silence, until she slowly moved away, took his hand, and led him off toward her quarters.

For a long time Arutha sat watching Guy. The Protector of Armengar was lost in his own thoughts, drinking absently from his ale cup, the fire's crackle the only sound in the room. Then at last Guy said, 'The thing I miss most is the wine, I think. There are times when wine



suits a mood, don't you agree?'

Arutha nodded, sampling his own ale. 'Amos told us of your loss.' Guy waved absently, and Arutha could see he was a

little drunk, his movements not as sure, not quite as controlled. But his voice betrayed no slurring of speech. He sighed deeply. 'More your loss than mine, Arutha. You never met her.' Arutha didn't know what to say. He suddenly felt

irritated by this, as if he was being forced to watch something private, somehow being forced to share a bond of grief with a man he should hate. 'You said we needed to speak, Guy.'

Guy nodded, pushing aside his cup. He still stared off into the distance. 'I have need of you.' He turned to face Arutha. 'I have need of the Kingdom, at least, and that means Lyam.' Arutha motioned for Guy to continue. "it makes little difference to me personally if I possess your good opinion or not. But it is clear I need your acceptance as the leader of these people.' He lapsed into thoughtfulness. Then he said, 'I thought your brother would marry Anita. It was the logical thing to do to bolster his claim. But then, he was King before he knew it. Rodric did us all a favour by having one lucid moment before he died.' He looked hard at Arutha. 'Anita is a fine young woman. I had no desire to wed her, only a need at the time. I would have let her find her own . . . satisfactions. It is better this way.' He sat back. 'i'm drunk. My mind wanders.' He closed his eye, and for a moment Arutha thought he might be drifting off to sleep. Then Guy said, "Amos told you how we came to Armengar, so I'll not repeat that tale. But there are other matters I think he did not touch upon.' Again he was silent. Another long period without words was followed by "Did your father ever tell you how there came to be so much bitterness between us?' Arutha kept his voice calm. 'He said you were at the heart of every conspiracy in court against the Western Realm, and you used your position with both Rodric and his father to undermine Father's position.' To Arutha's astonishment, Guy said, 'That's mostly true. A different interpretation of my actions might give a softer label to what I did, but my actions under the reigns of Rodric and his father before him were never in the interest of your father or the West. "No, I speak of . . . other things.'

'He never spoke of you except to brand you as an enemy.' Arutha considered, then went on, 'Dulanic said you and Father were friends once.' Guy again looked at the fire. His manner was distant,

as if remembering. Softly he said, 'Yes, very good friends.' Again he fell into silence, then just as Arutha was about to speak, he said, 'it started when we were both young men at court, during the reign of Rodric the Third. We were among the very first squires sent to the royal court - Caldric's innovation was to produce rulers who know more than their fathers.' Guy considered. 'Let me tell you how it was. And when I'm done maybe you'll understand why you and your brother were never sent to court. 'I was three years younger than your father, who was

barely eighteen, but we were of a size and temper. At first we were thrown together, for he was a distant cousin, and I was expected to teach manners to this son of a rustic duke. In time we became friends. Over the years we gambled, wenched, and fought together. 'Oh, we had differences, even then. Borric was a frontier noble's son, more concerned with old concepts of honour and duty than in understanding the true causes of events around him. I, well. . .' He drew his hand down over his face, as if stirring himself awake. His tone became more brisk. 'I was raised in the eastern courts, and I was marked to command from an early age. My family is as old and honoured as any in the Kingdom, even yours. Had Belong and his brothers been slightly less gifted generals and my forebears slightly better ones the Bas-Tyras would have been kings instead of the Condoins. So I had been taught from boyhood how the game of politics is played in the realms. No, we were very different in some ways, your father and I, but in my life there has never been a man I've loved more than' Borric.' He looked hard at Arutha. 'He was the brother I never had.' Arutha was intrigued. He had no doubt Guy was

colouring things to suit his purpose. suspecting even the drunkenness was a pose. but he was curious to hear of his father's youth. 'What, then, caused the estrangement between you?'

"We competed, as young men do, in the hunt,

gambling, and for the affection of the ladies. Our political differences led to hot words from time to time, but we always found a way to gloss over arguments and reconcile ourselves. Once we even came to blows over some thoughtless remarks I made. I had said your great-grandfather had been nothing more than the disgruntled third son of a king, seeking to gain by strength of arms that which could not be found within the existing Kingdom. Borric saw him a great man who planted the banner of the Kingdom in Bosania.

'I held that the West was a sap upon the resources of

the Kingdom. The distances are too great for proper administration. You rule in Krondor. You know you govern an independent realm, with only broad policy coming from Rillanon. The Western Realm is almost a separate nation. Anyway, we argued about that, then fought. Afterward we relented in our anger. But that was the first sign of how deep were the differences we felt over the policies of the realms. Still, even those differences did nothing to lessen the bond between us.' 'You make it sound a reasonable disagreement between honourable men over politics. But I knew Father. He hated you and his hate ran deep, there must be more. '

Guy again studied the firelight for a time. Softly he said, 'Your father and I were rivals in many things, but most bitterly for your mother.'

Arutha sat forward. 'What?'

"When your uncle Malcom died of the fever, your

father was called home. As older brother, Borric would inherit, which is why he had been sent to court for an education, but with Malcom dead your grandfather was alone.

So your grandfather had the King name your father Warden of the West and send him back to Crydee.

Your grandfather was aging - your grandmother had already died, and with Malcom's death he seemed to fade quickly. It was less than two years later that he died and Borric became Duke of Crydee. By then Brucal had returned to Yabon, and I was Senior Squire of the King's court. I looked forward to Borric's return - for he was to present himself to the King to swear fealty as all new dukes are required to do during the first year of their office.' Arutha calculated and realized that had to be the time

his father had visited Brucal at Yabon, on his way to the capital. It was during that visit that Borric's fancy was caught by a pretty serving maid, and from that union came Martin, a fact not known to Borric until five years later. Guy continued speaking. 'The year before Borric's

return to Rillanon, your mother came to court, to be a lady-in-waiting to Queen Janica, the King's second wife - Prince Rodric's mother. That's when Catherine and I met. Until Gwynnath, she was the only woman I've ever loved. ' Guy lapsed into silence, and suddenly Arutha felt an

odd sense of shame, as if he had somehow forced Guy to reexamine two painful losses. 'Catherine was rare, Arutha. I know you understand that, she was your mother, but when I first saw her she was as fresh as a

spring morning, with a blush in her cheeks and a hint of playfulness in her shy smile. Her hair was golden, with a shine to it. I fell in love with her the first moment I saw her. And so did your father. From that moment on, our competition for her attention became fierce.

'For two months we both courted her, and by the end of the second, your father and I were not speaking, so bitter was our rivalry for Catherine. Your father kept putting off his return to Crydee, choosing to stay and woo Catherine. We vied desperately for her favour.

'I was to have gone riding with Catherine one morning, but when I reached her quarters, she was readying to travel. She was first cousin to Queen Janica and, as such, a prize in the game of court intrigue. The lessons I had taught your father the years before had paid handsomely, for while I had been riding and walking in the garden with Catherine, he had been speaking to the King. Rodric directed your mother to wed your father, as was his right as her guardian. It was a politically expedient marriage, for even then the King had doubts as to his son's ability and his brother's health. Damn it, but Rodric was an unhappy man. His three sons from his first marriage had died before reaching manhood, and he never got over their deaths or the death of his beloved Queen Beatrice. And his younger brother, Erland, was a late child and sickly with the lung flux. He was but ten years older than Prince Rodric. The court knew that the King wished to name your father Heir, but Janica had given him a son, a shy boy whom Rodric despised. I think he forced your mother to marry your father to strengthen the tie to the throne, so he might name him Heir, and heaven knows he spent the next twelve years trying to either make the Prince a better man or break him in the trying. But the King never did name an Heir before he died, and we were left with Rodric the Fourth, a sadder, more broken man than his father.'

Arutha looked on, his cheeks flushed. 'What do you mean, the King forced my mother to marry my father?' Guy's one good eye blazed. 'It was a political marriage, Arutha.'

Arutha's anger rose up. 'But my mother loved my father!'

'By the time you were born, I'm sure she had learned to love him. Your father was a

good enough man and she

a loving woman. But in those days, she loved me.' His voice became thick with old emotions. "She loved me. I

had known her a year before Borric's return. We had already vowed to wed when my tenure as a squire was through, but it was a secret thing, a pledge between children made in a garden one night. I had written to my father, asking him to intercede with the Queen, to gain me Catherine's hand. I never thought to speak to the King. I, the clever son of an eastern lord, had been bested by the country noble's boy in a court intrigue. Damn, I had thought I was so wily. But I was then only nineteen. It was so long ago.

"I fell into a rage. In those days my temper was a match for your father's. I dashed from your mother's room and sought Borric out. We fought, in the King's palace, we duelled and almost killed each other. You must have seen the long wound upon your father's side, from under the left arm across his ribs. I gave him that scar. I bear a similar wound from him. I almost died. When I recovered, your father was a week gone to Crydee, taking Catherine with him. I would have followed, but the King forbade it on pain of death. He was correct, for they were married. I took to wearing black as a public mark of my shame. Then I was sent to fight Kesh at Deep Taunton.' He laughed a bitter laugh. 'Much of my reputation as a general came from that encounter. I owe my success in part to your father. I punished the Keshians for his having robbed me of Catherine. I did things no general in his right mind should do, leading attack after attack. I think now I hoped to die then.' His voice softened, and he chuckled. 'I was almost disappointed when they asked for quarter and terms of surrender.' Guy sighed. 'So much of what happened in my life

stems from that. I ceased holding ill will toward Borric. eventually, but he . . . turned a bitter side up when she died. He rejected the idea of sending his sons to the King's court. I think he worried I might take revenge upon you and Lyam.'

"He loved Mother; he was never a happy man after her death,' Arutha said, feeling somehow both uncomfortable and angry. He did not need to justify his father's behaviour to his most bitter enemy.

Guy nodded. 'I know, but when we are young we cannot entertain the idea another's feelings can be as deep as our own. Our love is so much loftier, our pain so much more intense. But as I grew older, I realized Borric loved Catherine as much as I did. And I think she did love him.' Guy's good eye fixed on a point in space. His 'tone became softer, reflective. "She was a wonderful, generous woman with room in her life for many loves. Yet, I think deep in his heart your father harboured doubts.' Guy regarded Arutha with an expression of

mixed wonder and pity. 'Can you imagine that? How sad it must have been? Perhaps, in a strange way, I was the luckier, for I knew she loved me. I had no doubt.'

Arutha noticed a faint sheen of moisture in Guy's good eye. The Protector brushed away the gathering tear in an unselfconscious gesture. He settled back, closing his eye, his hand to his forehead, and quietly added, 'There seems little justice in life at times.'

Arutha pondered. 'Why are you telling me this?'

Guy sat up, shedding his mood. 'Because I need you. And there can be no doubts on your part. To you I am a traitor who sought to take control of the Kingdom for his own aggrandizement. In part, you are correct.' Arutha was again surprised at Guy's candour.

'But how can you justify what you did to Erland?'

'I am responsible for his death. I cannot disavow that.'

'It was my captain who ordered his continued confinement after I had ordered his release. Radburn had his uses, but tended to be overzealous. I can understand his panic, for I would have punished him for letting Anita and you escape. I needed her to gain a foothold in the succession, and you would have been a useful bargaining piece with your father.' Seeing surprise on Arutha's face, he said, 'Oh yes, my agents knew you were in Krondor - or they reported to me when I returned - but Radburn made the error of thinking you'd lead him to Anita. It never occurred to him you might have nothing to do with her escape. The fool should have clapped you in jail and kept the search on for her.'

Arutha felt a return of his distrust and a lessening of sympathy. Despite Guy's forthright speech, his callous references to using people rankled. Guy continued, 'But I never wished Erland dead. I already had the Viceroyalty from Rodric, giving me full command over the West. I didn't need Erland, only a link to the throne: Anita. Rodric the Fourth was mad. I was one of the first to know - as was Caldric - for in kings people overlook and forgive 'behaviour they would not tolerate in others. Rodric could not be allowed to rule much longer. The first eight years of the war were difficult enough in the court, but in the last year of his reign, Rodric was almost totally without reason. Kesh always has an eye turned northward, seeking signs of weakness. I did not wish the burdens of kingship, but even with your father as heir after Erland, I simply felt I was better able to rule than anyone in a position to inherit.'

'But why all this intrigue? You had backing in the congress. Caldric, Father, and Erland barely overruled your attempt to become Prince Rodric's regent before he reached majority. You could have found another way.'

'The congress can ratify a King,' answered Guy,

pointing a finger at Arutha. 'it cannot remove him. I needed a way to take the throne without civil war. The war with the Tsurani dragged on, and Rodric would not give your father the Armies of the East. He wouldn't even give them to me, and I was the only man he trusted. Nine years of a losing war and a mad King, and the nation was bleeding to death. No, it had to end, but no matter how much backing I had, there were those like Brucal and your father who would have marched against

me.

"That's why I wanted Anita for my wife and you as a

bargaining piece. I was ready to offer Borric a choice.'

"What choice?"

"My preference was to let Borric rule in the West, to

divide the Kingdom and let each realm follow its own destiny; but I knew none of the western lords would have permitted that. So my offer to Borric was to allow him to name the Heir after me, even if it were Lyam or you. I would have named whoever he chose Prince of Krondor and I would have ensured I had no sons to contest for the crown. But your father would have had to accept me as King of Rillanon and swear fealty.'

Suddenly Arutha understood this man. He had put aside all questions of personal honour after he had lost Arutha's mother to Borric, but he had kept one honour above all others: his honour for the Kingdom. He had been willing to do anything, even commit regicide - to go down in history as a usurper and traitor - in exchange for removing a mad king. It left a bad taste in Arutha's mouth.

'With Rodric's death and Lyam being named Heir, all that became meaningless. Your brother is not known to me, but I expect he shares some of your father's nature. In any event, the Kingdom must be in better hands than when Rodric sat the throne.'

Arutha sighed. 'You have given me much to think about, Guy. I don't approve of your reasoning or your methods, but I understand some of it.'

'Your approval is immaterial. I repent nothing of what I have done, and will admit my decision to claim the throne myself, ignoring your father's place in succession, was done in part from spite. If I couldn't have your mother, Borric couldn't have the crown. Beyond selfish considerations, I also held the firm conviction I would have made a better king than your father. What I do best is rule. But it doesn't mean I feel good about what I've had to do.

'No, what I want is your understanding. You don't

have to like me, but you must accept me for who and what I am. I need your acceptance to secure the future of Armengar.'

Arutha became silent, feeling discomforted. A memory of a conversation two years previous flooded back into his mind. After a long silence, he said, 'I am not in a position to judge. I'm remembering a conversation with Lyam in our father's burial vault. I was ready to see Martin dead rather than risk civil war. My own brother. . .' he added softly.

'Such judgments are a necessary consequence of ruling.' He sat back, regarding Arutha. At last he said.

'How did your decision about Martin make you feel?'

Arutha seemed reluctant to share that with Guy. Then after a long silence had passed, he looked directly at the Protector. 'Dirty. It made me feel dirty.'

Guy extended his hand. "You do understand.'

Slowly Arutha took the proffered hand and shook. 'Now, to the heart of the matter.

.When we first came here, Amos, Armand, and I were sick, injured, and near-starved. These people healed us, strangers from an alien land, without questions. When we were fit, we volunteered to fight. then discovered it was expected that all who are able serve without question. So we took our place in the garrison of the city and began to learn of Armengar.

'The Protector before Gwynnath had been an able commander, as was Gwynnath, but both knew little of modern warfare. Nevertheless, they kept the Brotherhood and the goblins under control, keeping a bloody balance of sorts.

'Then Murmandamus came and things changed. When I arrived, the Brotherhood was victorious three out of four encounters. The Armengarians were losing, being routinely defeated for the first time in their history. I taught them modern warfare, and again we hold our own. Now nothing comes within twenty miles of the city without being seen by one of our scouts or patrols. But even with that, it is too late.'

"Why too late?'

'Even if Murmandamus weren't coming to crush us, this nation couldn't last another two generations. This city is dying. As best I can judge, two decades ago, there were perhaps fifteen thousand souls living within the city and in the surrounding countryside. Ten years ago, it was eleven or twelve thousand. Now it's more like seven or perhaps even less. Constant warfare, women of childbearing age being killed in battle, children dying when a steading or kraal is overrun: it all adds up to a declining population, a decline that seems to be accelerating. And



there's more. It's as if years of constant warfare have sapped the strength from these people. For all their willingness to fight, they seem somehow indifferent to the needs of daily living.

"The culture is twisted, Arutha. All they have is struggle and, in the end, death. Their poetry is limited to sagas of heroes, and their music is simple battle chants. Have you noticed there are no signs in the city? Everyone knows where everyone else lives and works. Why signs? Arutha, no one born in Armengar can read or write. They don't have the time to learn. This is a nation slipping inexorably into barbarism. Even should there have been no Murmandamus, in another two decades there would be no nation. They would be as the

nomads of the Thunderhell. No, it's the constant fighting.'

'I can see how that could give one a sense of futility. What can I do to help?'

'We need relief. I will gladly turn the governance of this city over to Brucaal -'

'Vandros. Brucaal retired.' Vandros, then. Bring Armengar into the Duchy of

Yabon. These people fled the Kingdom, ages ago. Now they would not hesitate to embrace it, should I but order it, so much have they changed. But give me two thousand heavy foot from the garrison at Yabon and Tyr-Sog, and I'll hold this city against Murmandamus for another year. Add a thousand more and two thousand horse, and I'll rid the Plain of Isbandia of every goblin and Dark Brother. Give me the Armies of the West, and I'll drive Murmandamus back to Sar-Sargoth and burn the city down with him inside. Then we can have commerce and children can be children, not little warriors. Poets will compose and artists paint. We will have music and dancing. Then maybe this city will grow again.' 'And will you wish to remain as Protector, or as Earl

of Armengar?' asked Arutha, not fully rid of his distrust. "Damn it,' said Guy, slamming his hand down on the

table. 'if Lyam has the brains of a bag of nails, yes.' Guy sagged back into his chair. "I'm tired, Arutha. I'm drunk and tired.' His good eye brimmed. 'I've lost the only thing I've cherished in ages, and all I've left is the need of these people. I'll not fail them, but once they're safe. . .' Arutha was stunned. Before him Guy bared his soul

and what he saw was a man without much reason left to live. It was sobering. 'I think I can persuade Lyam to agree, if you understand what his attitude toward you

will be.'

'I don't care what he thinks of me, Arutha. He can have my head, for all of it.' His voice again betrayed his fatigue. 'I don't think I care at all anymore.'

"I'll send messages.'

Guy laughed, a bitter, frustrated laugh. 'That, you see, is the problem, dear cousin. You don't think I've been sitting here for the last full year hoping a Prince of Krondor might blunder into Armengar? I've sent a dozen messages to Yabon, and toward Highcastle, outlining in detail what the situation here is and what I've proposed to you. The difficulty is that while Murmandamus lets anyone come north, no one - nothing - goes south. That Beasthunter you found was one of the last to try for the south. I don't know what happened to the messenger he escorted, but I can imagine. . . .' He let the thought drift Off. 'You see, Arutha, we're cut off from the Kingdom Utterly, totally, and unless you've an idea we've not thought of, without a prayer.'

Martin awoke sputtering, spitting out a mouthful of water. Briana's laughter filled the room as she tossed a towel at him and replaced the now empty water pitcher. 'You're as difficult to wake as a bear in winter.'

Blinking as he dried himself off, Martin said, 'I must be.' He fixed her with a black look, then found his anger slip away as he regarded her smiling face. After a moment he smiled in return. 'Out in the woods I'm a light sleeper. Indoors I relax.'

She knelt upon the bed and kissed him. She was dressed in tunic and trousers. 'I must ride out to one of our steadings. Care to come? It is only for the day.'

Martin grinned. 'Certainly.'

She kissed him again. 'Thank you.'

'For what?' he asked, clearly confused.

'Lying here with me.'

Martin stared at her. 'You're thanking me?'

'Of course, I asked you.'

'You are of a strange people, Bree. Most men I know would happily slit my throat to have had my place here last night.' She turned her head slightly, a puzzled look on her

face. 'Truly? How odd. I could say the same about most of the women here and you, Martin. Though no one would fight over something like bed rights. You are free to choose your partners, and they are free to answer yes or no. That is why I thanked you, for saying yes.'

Martin grabbed her and kissed her, half-roughly. 'in my land we do things differently.' He let her go,

suddenly concerned he had been too rough. She seemed a little uncertain but not frightened. 'I'm sorry. It's just that . . . it was not a favour, Bree.'

She leaned close and rested her head upon his shoulder. "You speak of something beyond the comforts of the bedchamber."

'Yes.'

She was silent for a long time. "Martin, here in Armengar, we know the wisdom of not planning too far into the future." There was a catch in her speech and her eyes gleamed. "My mother was to have wed the Protector. My father has been dead eleven years. It would have been a joyous union." Martin could see the wetness spreading down her cheeks. "Once I was betrothed. He rode to answer a goblin raid on a kraal. He never returned." She studied his face. "We do not lightly make promises. A night shared is not a vow."

'I am not a frivolous man.'

She studied his face. 'I know,' she said softly. 'And I am not a frivolous woman. I choose partners carefully.'

"There is something here building quickly between us."

There is something Martin. I know that. It will . . . come to us as time and good circumstances permit, and to worry what the outcome of these things will be is wasted effort.' She bit her lower lip as she struggled for her next words. 'I am a commander, privy to knowledge most in the city are ignorant of. For the moment I can only ask you not to expect more than I can freely give.'

Seeing his mood darken, she smiled and kissed him. 'Come, let us ride.'

Martin quickly dressed, uncertain of what had been accomplished, but certain it had been important. He felt both relieved and troubled: relieved he had stated his feelings, then troubled he had not done so clearly and her answer had been clouded. Still, he had been reared by elves, and as Briana had said, things would come to pass in their own good time.

Arutha finished recounting the previous night's conversation to Laurie, Baru, and Roald. The boys had been gone for a day. Martin had not returned to their quarters, and Arutha thought he knew where he had spent the night.

Laurie thought long on what Arutha had said. "So the population is falling."

'Or so Guy says.'

'He's right,' said a voice from the door.

They looked and discovered Jimmy and Locklear standing there, each with his arm about the waist of a pretty girl. Locklear appeared unable to keep his face in repose. No matter how hard he tried, his mouth seemed determined to set itself in a grin.

Jimmy introduced Krinsta and Bronwynn, then said, 'The girls showed us the city. Arutha there are entire sections standing empty, home after home with no one living there.' Jimmy looked about, discovering a plate of fruit, attacked a pear. 'I guess onward of twenty thousand people lived here once. Now I guess half of that.'

"I've already agreed in principle to help Armengar, but the problem is getting messages back to Yabon. It seems Murmandamus may be lax in letting people in, but he's rigorous in seeing no one gets out.'

'Makes sense,' said Roald. 'Most of those coming north are heading for his camp anyway, So what if a few blunder into this city and help. He's massing his army and can probably drive past here if he chooses.'

Baru said, 'I think I can get through, if I go alone.'

Arutha looked interested and Baru said, 'I am a hillman, and while these people are kin they are also city people . Only those in the few high steadings and kraals might have my skill. Moving at night. hiding during the day, I should be able to cross over into the Yabon Hills. Once there, no moredhel or goblin would be able to keep pace with me. '

'Getting into the Yabon Hills would be the problem.' said Laurie. 'Remember how those trolls had chased that Beasthunter for what, days? I don't know.'

'I'll think on it, Baru,' said Arutha. 'it may be that desperate gamble is all we have, but perhaps there's another way. We might mount a raiding party to get someone up to the crest, then turn and fight our way back, giving whoever goes south as much of a head start as possible. It may not be possible, but I'll discuss it with Guy. If we can't discover another choice, I'll permit you to try. Though I don't think alone is necessarily the best. We managed all right in a small company getting in and out of Moraelin.' He rose. 'if any of you can conceive a better plan, I'll welcome it. I am going to join Guy in inspecting the battlements. If we're stuck here when the assault comes, we might as well lend all the aid we may.' He left the room.

Guy's hair blew wildly as they looked out over the plain beyond the city. 'I've inspected every inch of this wall. and I still don't believe the quality of engineering.' Arutha could only agree. The stones used had been cut to a precision undreamed of by the Masterbuilders and stonemasons of the Kingdom. Running his hand over a joint, he could barely feel where one stone ended and another began. 'it is a wall that might have defied Segersen's engineers had they come.'

'We had some good engineers in our armies, Arutha. I can't see how this wall could be brought down short of a miracle.' He took out his sword and struck hard enough to make the blade ring, then pointed to the merlon where he had struck. Arutha inspected the place and saw only a slight lighter-colour scratch. 'It seems a blue granite, like ironstone, but even harder. It's a stone common enough to these mountains, but harder to work than anything I've seen. How it was worked is unknown. And the footings below the plinth are twenty feet into the earth, thirty feet from front to back. I can't even guess how the blocks were moved from the quarries in the mountains. If you could tunnel under it, the best that might happen is the entire wall section might sink down and crush you. And you can't even do that, because the wall sits atop bedrock.'

Arutha leaned back against the wall, looking at the city and the citadel beyond. "This is easily the most defensible city I have ever heard of. You should be able to handle up to twenty-to-one odds.'

'Ten-to-one's the conventional figure for overrunning a castle, but I'm inclined to agree. Except for one thing: Murmandamus's damn magic. He may not be able to bring these walls down, but I'll warrant he's got a means to get past them. Somehow. Else he wouldn't be coming.'

'You're certain? Why not bottle you up with a small harrying force and move his army south?'

'He can't leave us at his back. He had his way with us for a year before I took command, and could have bled us to death by now if I hadn't changed the rules of the game. Over the last two years I've taught our soldiers everything I know. With Armand and Amos helping them learn, they now have the advantages of modern warcraft. No, Murmandamus knows he has an army of seven thousand Armengarians ready to jump on his rear if he turns his back. He can't leave us behind his lines. We'd hamstring him.'

'So he must rid himself of you first, then turn to the Kingdom.'

'Yes. And he must do it soon, or he loses another season. It turns to winter quickly up here. We see snow weeks before the Kingdom. The passes become blocked in days, sometimes in only hours. Once he has moved south, he must be victorious, for he cannot move his army north again until spring. He is on a timetable. He must come within the next two weeks.'

'So we must get word out soon.'

Guy nodded. 'Come, let me show you some more.'

Arutha followed the man, feeling a strange sense of divided loyalties. He knew he must help the Armengarians,

but he still was not comfortable with Guy. Arutha had come to understand why Guy had done what he did and in a strange way he even grudgingly admired him. but he didn't like him. And he knew why he didn't like him. Guy had made him see a similarity of nature common to them, a willingness to do what must be done regardless of cost. So far, Arutha had never gone to the lengths Guy had, but he now understood he might have acted in much the same way had he been in Guy's place. It was a discovery about himself he didn't particularly like.

They moved through the city, and Arutha asked about those details observed when they had first entered Armengar.

'Yes,' said Guy. 'There are no clear lines of fire, so that every turn can hide an ambush. I've a city map in the citadel, and the city is as it is by design rather than chance. Once you see the pattern, it's easy to know which directions to choose to reach any given point in the city, but without knowing what the pattern is, it's easy to get turned about, to be led back toward the outer wall. He pointed at a building. 'Every house lacks windows on the street, and every roof is an archery platform. This city was built to cost any attackers dearly.'

Soon they were inside the citadel, and saw the boys coming across the courtyard. "Where are the girls?" Arutha asked.

Locklear looked disappointed. 'They had to go do some things before they reported back for duty.'

Guy studied the two squires. 'Well then, come with us if you've nothing better to do.'

They followed Guy into the first floor and down to the lift. Guy rang the bell, giving the code to raise them to the highest roof. Reaching it, they looked down upon the city and plain beyond. 'Armengar.' His hand swept across the horizon. 'There,' he pointed, 'is the Plain of Isbandia, cut across by the Vale of Isbandia, the limit of our holdings to the north and northwest. The plain beyond that is Murmandamus's. To the east, the Edder Forest, almost as vast as the Blackwood or the Green Heart. We don't know much about it, save we can safely lumber at the edges. Anyone who goes more than a few miles deep tends not to be seen again.' He pointed to the north. 'Beyond the vale is Sar-Sargoth. If you're especially bold, you can climb the hills at the north edge of the vale and look across the plain to see the lights of this city's twin.'

Jimmy studied the war engines upon the roof. 'I don't know a lot about this, but can those catapults shoot beyond the outer wall?'

'No,' was all Guy said. 'Come along.'

They all moved back to the lift and Guy pulled the cord. Arutha noticed there was some code to indicate up or down, and, he supposed, the number of floors. They descended to the ground floor, then lower yet. They reached a subbasement, several levels below the ground, and Guy led them from the platform. They passed a giant winch arrangement with a team of four horses hitched to a large wheel, which Arutha supposed was the power source for the lift. It certainly looked impressive, with large tongue and grooved wheels, and strange multiple rope and pulley arrangements. But Guy ignored the horse team and drivers, walking past them. He pointed at a large door, barred from the inside. 'That's the bolt hole out of here. We keep it sealed, for by some fluke or other, when the door's open a constant breeze blows through here, something to be avoided.' Opposite the large door stood another, which he opened, leading them into a natural tunnel. He took a strange-looking lantern from beside the door, one that glowed with a lower level of light than expected. Guy said, 'This thing uses some sort of alchemy to give off light. I don't understand it fully, but it works. We risk no flames here. You'll see why.' Jimmy had been examining the walls and pulled off a

white, flaky wax substance. He rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger and sniffed. 'I understand,' he said, making a face. 'Naphtha.'

'Yes.' Guy looked at Arutha. 'He's a sharp one.'

'So he's quick to remind me. How did you know?'

'Remember at the bridge south of Sarth, last year?'

The one I fired to keep Murad and the Black Slayers from crossing? That's what I used, distillation of naphtha.'

'Come,' said Guy, taking them through another door.

The reek of tar assailed their noses as they entered the chamber. Strange-looking large buckets were hung from chains. A dozen shirtless men laboured to manoeuvre the buckets down into a huge pool of black liquid. The odd lanterns burned about the cavern, but mostly the place was shrouded in darkness. 'We've tunnels honeycombing this entire mountain, and this stuff is found in all of them. There's some natural source of naphtha below and it constantly bubbles to the surface. We must keep taking it off, or it seeps upward into the basements of the city, through cracks in the bedrock. If work was halted, the stuff would be pooling in the cellars of the city within a few days. But as the Armengarians have been doing this 'for years, it's under control.'

'I can see why you don't want to risk a fire,' said Locklear, in open wonder.

"Fires we can handle. We've had dozens, as recently as

last year, briefly. What we've discovered, or rather what the Armengarians have discovered, is some uses for this stuff we don't have in the Kingdom.' He motioned them into another chamber, where odd looking coils of tubing ran between vats. "Here we do the distillation, and some of the other mixing. I understand a tenth of it, but the alchemists can explain. They make all manner of things from this naphtha, even some odd salves that keep wounds from festering, but one thing they've found is the secret of making Quegan fire.'

.Quegan fire!' Arutha exclaimed.

"They don't call it that, but it's the same stuff. The

walls are limestone, and it's limestone dust that turns naphtha into Quegan fire oil. Fling it from a catapult and it burns and even water won't put it out. That's why we have to be so careful, for it doesn't just burn.' He looked at Locklear. 'The fumes are heavy, hugging the ground, but if you let the fumes build up, vent them with a lot of art, then hit a spark, the fumes explode.' He pointed toward a far cavern, loaded up with wooden barrels. that storage cave wasn't there ten years ago. When a barrel is emptied, it is filled again, or put under water until used. Some dolt left three empties standing about and somehow a spark hit one and. . . Just the amount of that stuff which soaks into the wood, then evaporates, can give off a tremendous explosion. That's why we keep the doors closed. The breeze off the mountains through the bolt hole can vent this entire complex in a day or two. And if all this went up at once. . .' He let their imaginations provide the picture. 'I've had the Armengarians making this for two years now, to give Murmandamus a warm welcome when he comes.'

'How many barrels?' asked Arutha.

'Over twenty five thousand.'

Arutha was staggered. When he had met Amos, the pirate had had two hundred barrels in the hold of his ship, a fact not known to the Tsurani raiders who had set fire to his ship. When it had gone up, it had blown a column of flames hundreds of feet into the air, engulfing the ship in an instant, incinerating it within minutes. The light of the flames had been seen for miles up and down the coast. If half the town hadn't already been burned by Tsurani raiders the fire would have devastated Crydee.

'That's enough. . .'

'To fire the entire city,' finished Guy.

'Why so much?' asked Jimmy. "Something you must understand, all of you. The

Armengarians have never thought of leaving here. In their judgment, there's no other place to find refuge.



They came north to flee the Kingdom, so they thought they couldn't return south. On every side they saw enemies. Should the worst occur, they'll fire this city rather than let Murmandamus capture it. I've developed a plan beyond that, but in either case, a lot of fire could prove useful.' He returned toward the tunnel leading to the lift, the others following behind.

Martin sat resting against a tree. He kissed Briana's hair as she sank deeper into his arms. She stared off into some unseen place. Before them a small brook wound its way through a stand of woods, shrouding them in soft, cool shadows. Her patrol had broken for a noontime meal, which was being provided by the local farmers. She and Martin had stolen away to spend the time alone. The woodland setting put Martin more at ease than he had been in months, but still he was troubled. They had made love under the trees and now were simply finding pleasure in each other's company, but Martin still felt a lack inside. In her ear he said, "Bree, I wish this could go

on forever.'

She sighed and wiggled a little. 'I also, Martin. You are such a man as . . . another I knew. I think I could not wish for more.'

'When this is finished

She cut him off. 'When this is finished. Then we can talk of things. Come, we must get back.' She dressed quickly, Martin openly admiring her. She had none of the frail beauty of the women he had known at home. There was leather toughness to her makeup, tempered by a deep feminine quality. She was not a pretty woman by any standards, but she was striking and, with those arresting qualities of self-confidence and self-reliance Martin saw in her, she was stunning. even beautiful. In all ways, he had become captivated by her.

He finished dressing and before she could move away reached out and took her by the arm, turning her and bringing her to him. With a deep passion he kissed her, then said, 'I need not speak, but you know my need and my desire. I have waited for you too long.'

She looked up into his dark eyes. She reached up and touched his face. 'And I you.' She kissed him gently. 'We must return.'

. He let her lead him back to the village. A pair of guardsmen were walking toward them when they left the woods. They halted and one said, 'Commander, we were about to come fetch you.' She regarded the second man, not one of her

company. 'What is it?' 'The Protector commands all the patrols to ride out

and order the steadings and kraals abandoned. Everyone

is to move at once to the city. Murmandamus's army is on the march. They will stand outside the walls within the week.' Briana said, 'Orders to ride. We shall split the patrol.'

Grenlyn, you'll take half and head down to the lowland kraal and the river steadings. I'll take the ones higher up along the ridge. The moment you finish, ride back as soon as possible. The Protector will need all the scouts he can muster. Now go.' She looked back at Martin. 'Come, we have much to do.'

11

## Discovery

Gamina sat up, screaming.

Within moments Katala was in the child's room.

holding her. Gamina sobbed for a short while, then quieted, as a sleepy William came into her room.

followed by a grumpy-looking firedrake. Fantus padded past William and placed his head on the bed by Katala.

'Was it a bad dream, baby?' asked Katala.

Gamina nodded. Softly she said, 'Yes, Mama.' She was finally learning to speak, not always relying upon the mental speech that had marked her as a special talent since birth. With her family dead, Gamina had been reared by Rogen the blind seer, before he brought her to Stardock. Rogen had aided Pug in discovering that the Enemy was behind all the troubles besetting the Kingdom, though he had suffered injury in uncovering this secret. He and Gamina had stayed with Pug's family while he recovered, and over the last year had come to be as members. Rogen had been as a grandfather to William, while to Gamina, Katala was a mother and William a brother. The old man had died peacefully in his sleep three months before, but at the last he had been happy his ward had found others besides himself whom she could love and trust. Katala hugged and caressed the child while she calmed down.

Meecham, the tall franklin, hurried into the room looking for the source of any danger. He had returned from Kelewan with Hochopepa and Elgahar of the Assembly shortly after Pug had departed in search of the Watchers. Their other companion, Brother Dominic, had returned to the Ishapian abbey at Sarth. Meecham had taken it upon himself to act as protector of Pug's family while the magician was upon Kelewan. For all his fierce appearance and stoic demeanour, he was one of Gamina's favourites. She called him Uncle Meecham. He stood behind Katala, smiling one of his very rare smiles at the tiny girl.

Hochopepa and Kulgan entered the room, the two magicians of different worlds, alike in so many ways. Both came and fussed over the girl while Katala said, "Still up working?"

Hochopepa said, 'Certainly, it's still early.' He looked up. 'Isn't it?'

Meecham said, "No. unless you mean early in the morning. It's an hour past midnight.'

'Kulgan said, 'Well, we were involved in some interesting discourse, and -'

"You lost track of time,' Katala said. Her tone was slightly disapproving, slightly amused. Pug was title holder to the property of Stardock and since he had left she had assumed control of the community. Her calm nature, intelligence, and ability to deal with people tactfully had made her the natural leader of the diverse community of magic users and their families, though occasionally Hochopepa was overheard calling her 'that tyrannical woman.' No one minded, for they knew he spoke with respect and affection.

Kulgan said, 'We were discussing some reports sent by Shimone at the Assembly.' By agreement, the rift between the worlds was opened for brief periods on a regular schedule so messages could be exchanged between the Academy at Stardock and the Assembly of Magicians on Kelewan. Katala looked up expectantly, but Hochopepa said.

'Still no word of Pug.'

Katala sighed and, suddenly irritated, said, 'Hocho. Kulgan, you may do as you like in your research, but poor Elgahar seems almost ready to drop. He does almost all the training of the new Greater Path magicians, and he never complains. You should bend some of your efforts to helping him.'

Kulgan took out his pipe and said, "We stand properly corrected.' He and Hochopepa exchanged glances. Both knew Katala's brusque manner was born from frustration over a husband absent a year.

Hochopepa said, 'indeed.' He also unlimbered a pipe, a habit acquired in his year of working beside Kulgan. As Meecham had once observed, the two magicians were two peas in a pod.

Katala said, 'And if you intend to light those foul-smelling things, take them and yourselves out of here.

This is Gamina's bedchamber, and I'll not have her room %re~uinlgaonf wsmasokoen the verge of lighting his and hErlted 'Very well. How is the child?'

Gamina had ceased her crying and spoke softly. 'i'm all right.' Since she had learned to speak, her voice had never been raised above a soft, childish whisper, save for

her scream of a few moments before. 'I . . . had a bad dream.'

"What sort of dream?' asked Katala.

Gamina's eyes began to brim with tears. 'I heard Papa calling me. '

Kulgan and Hochopepa both looked down at the girl intently. 'What did he say, child?' asked Kulgan softly so as not to frighten the girl.

Katala went ashen, but showed no other signs of fear. She was born of a line of warriors and she could face anything, anything save this not knowing how her husband fared. Gently she said, "What did he say, Gamina?'

"He was -' As she did when under stress, she changed

to mind-speech. He was in a strange place, far away. He was with somebody.? somebodies. else. He said, he said What, child?' said Hochopepa.

He said we must wait for a message, then something changed. He was - gone. in an empty place. I became frightened. I felt so alone.

Katala held the girl closely. She controlled her voice, but she felt fear as she said, 'You're not alone, Gamina.' But inwardly Katala echoed the girl's thoughts. Even when Pug had been taken from her by the Assembly to become a Great One, she had not felt this alone.

Pug closed his eyes in fatigue. He let his head fall forward until it rested upon Tomas's shoulder. Tomas looked back. 'Did you get through?'

With a heavy sigh, Pug said, 'Yes, but - it was more difficult than I had thought, and I frightened the child.'

"Still, you got through. Can you do it again?'

"I think so. The girl's mind is unique and should be

easier to reach next time. I know more about how this process works. Before I only had the theory. Now I've done it.'

"Good. We may need that skill.'

They were speeding through the greyness they had come to call 'rift-space', that place between the very strands of time and the physical universe. Tomas had instructed Ryath to go there the moment Pug had signalled the end of his contact with those at Stardock. Now the dragon sent a mind message. Where dost thou wish, Valheru?

Tomas spoke aloud. 'To the City Forever.'

Ryath seemed to shudder as she took control of that nothingness around her and bent it to her needs in travel. The featureless grey about them pulsed, and somehow they changed directions within this boundless dimension this no place. Then the fabric of grey about them rippled once more and they were somewhere else.

An odd spot appeared before them in the grey, the first hint of any reality within rift-space. It grew as rapidly as if Ryath were speeding through some physical plane, then they were above it. It was a city, a place of terrible and alien beauty. It possessed towers of twisted symmetry, minarets impossibly slender, oddly designed buildings that sprawled below the vaulting arches between the towers. Fountains of complex fashion spewed forth drops of liquid silver that turned to crystals, filling the air with tinkling music as they shattered upon the tiles of the fountain, becoming liquid again and running into drains.

The dragon banked and sped downward, flying above

the centre of a magnificent boulevard, nearly a hundred yards wide. The entire street was tiled, and the tiles glowed with soft hues, each subtly different from the next, so that over a distance it appeared a gradually changing rainbow. And as the dragon's shadow passed over, the tiles blinked and glowed, then shifted colour, and music filled the air, a theme of majestic beauty, bringing a stab of longing for green fields beside sparkling brooks while soft pastel sunsets coloured magnificent mountains. The images were nearly overwhelming and Pug shook his head to clear it, putting aside a soft sadness that such a wonderful place could never be found. They flew under heroic arches, a thousand feet above their heads, and tiny flower petals of sparkling white and gold, glowing rose and vermilion, pastels green and blue fell about them, a softly caressing rain scented of wild flowers, as they made for the heart of the city.

'Who built this wonder?' asked Pug.

'No one knows,' said Tomas, 'Some unknown race.'

'Perhaps the dead gods.' Pug studied the city as they flew over it. 'Or perhaps no one built it.'

'How could that be?' asked Pug.

'In an infinite universe, all things are not only possible but, no matter how improbable, certain to exist somewhere at some time. It may be this city sprang into existence at the very moment of creation. The Valheru first found it ages ago, exactly as you see it. It is one of

the greatest mysteries of the many universes the Valheru have travelled. No one lived here, or we Valheru never found them. Some have come here to abide awhile, but none stay long. This place is never changing, for it stands where there is no true time. It is said the City Forever may be the only truly immortal thing in the universes.' With a sad and rueful note he said, 'A few of the Valheru attempted to destroy it, out of pique. It also may be the only thing impervious to their rage.' Then a flicker of motion arrested Pug's attention, and suddenly a swarm of creatures leaped from atop a distant building, took wing, and banked in their direction. He pointed toward them and Tomas said, 'it seems we are expected.' The creatures came speeding at them, larger red

versions of the elemental beings that Pug had destroyed on the shores of the Great Star Lake the year before. They were man-shaped, and their large crimson bat wings beat the wind as they sped toward the two dragon riders. Calmly Pug said, "Should we land?" 'This is but the first test. It will amount to little.' Ryath screamed a battle clarion and the demon host recoiled, then dived at them. On the first pass, Tomas's golden blade arced outward and two creatures fell in screaming agony to the stones below as his sword severed batlike wings. Pug cast blue energies which danced from creature to creature, causing them to contort in pain as they fell, unable to fly. As each struck the ground, it vanished in green flame and silver sparks. Ryath unleashed a blast of fire, and all those within the blast were withered to ash. In moments the creatures were gone.

Now the dragon turned and flew toward a sinister building of black stone, squatting like some brooding malignancy in the midst of beauty. Tomas said, "Someone makes it painfully obvious where we must flee to. It will clearly be a trap.'

Pug said, "Will we need to protect Ryath?"

The dragon snorted, but Tomas said, 'Only against the most powerful magic and should that come to pass, we shall be dead and she may flee back to the real universe.

Do you hear?'

I hear and understand, answered the dragon.

They swooped down over a brick courtyard and the dragon circled. Tomas used his power to lift himself and Pug from Ryath's back and lower them to the stones.

'Return to the fountains and rest. The water is sweet and the surroundings soothing. Should anything go amiss, depart as you will. If we need you, here or upon Midkemia, you'll hear my call.'

I will answer, Tomas.

The dragon departed and Tomas turned to Pug.  
"Come, we should find an interesting reception ahead.'

Pug looked at his boyhood friend. 'Even as a child, your view of the interesting was somewhat broader than mine. Still, there is no choice. Will we find Macros within?'

"Probably not, for this is where we have been brought.

I doubt the Enemy would make it easy for us.'  
They entered the only door to the vast black building, and the moment they were both beyond the portal, a vast stone door descended, blocking their retreat. Tomas looked back with amusement. 'So much for an easy retreat.'

Pug measured the stone. 'I can deal with this if needs be, but it will take time.'

Tomas nodded. 'I thought as much. Let us go on.'

They moved down a long corridor, and Pug created light, which glowed brightly in a circle about them. The walls were without features, smooth and unmarked, leading only in one direction. The floor seemed . fashioned of the same material.

The end of the corridor produced a single door without markings or means to open. Pug studied it and invoked a spell. With a grinding note of protest the door rose upward, permitting them to pass. They entered a vast hall, with doors in a circle. As they entered, those doors flew open and a horde of creatures came tumbling out, snarling and screeching. Apes with the heads of eagles, cats with turtle shells, serpents with arms and legs, %~ with extra arms - an army of horrors came pouring forth. Tomas drew his sword, raised his shield, and shouted, 'Make ready, Pug.'

Pug incanted and a ring of crimson flames exploded upward about them, engulfing the first rank of creatures, who exploded in searing hot silver flashes. Many of the creatures held back, but those that could leap or fly cleared the top of the flames, to meet destruction from Tomas's golden sword. As he struck them, they vanished in a shower of glowing silver sparkles, accompanied by a stench of rotting decay. The press of creatures continued, with more and more coming from the doors. As they pressed forward, those before them were pushed into Pug's mystic flames and exploded in brilliance for an instant before vanishing. Pug said, "There seems no end of them." tommas nodded as he cut down a giant rat with eagle's

wings. 'Can you close the portals?'

Pug worked magic, and a loud wail of grinding metal and stone filled the chamber as the doors to the hall were

forced closed. Creatures seeking to push through were crushed between door and wall, dying with loud piteous cries, shrieks, and hootings. Tomas dispatched all the monsters that had cleared the flames, and for a moment he and Pug stood alone within the circle of fire.

Tomas panted slightly. 'This is irritating.'

Pug said, 'I can finish this.' The burning circle began to expand outward, and each creature it touched died. Soon it pressed to the very walls of the hall, and as the last creature died in an explosion and shriek, the flames winked out of existence.

Pug looked about. 'Each door holds dozens of those beasts behind. Which way do you think?' Tomas said, 'I think down.'

Pug reached out and Tomas slung his shield over his back. He took Pug's hand while still gripping his sword. Another incantation was mouthed, and Tomas saw his friend becoming transparent. He looked down and saw he could view the floor through his own body. Pug spoke and sounded distant. 'Do not release my hand until I say, or it will be difficult to get you back.'

Then Tomas saw the floor rise, or rather they were sinking. Darkness engulfed them as they passed down into the rock. After a long time it was light again as they entered another chamber. Something sped through the air, and Tomas felt pain erupt in his side. He looked down and saw a warrior standing below, a thing of powerful shoulders with a boar's head, wearing gaudy blue plate armour on back and chest. The creature bellowed, spittle dripping from long tusks, as he swung a wicked looking double-bladed axe at Tomas, who barely managed to turn it with his own blade. Pug shouted, 'Let go!' Tomas released Pug's hand and instantly was solid

- again. He fell to the floor, landing lightly before the man-boar as the creature brought his axe crashing down. Tomas parried again, and retreated, seeking to free his shield. Pug landed upon his feet and began incanting a spell. The boar thing moved rapidly for something so large, and Tomas could only just defend. Then the Vallheru countered a blow with a parry and a thrust and the thing was wounded. It backed away, bellowing in anger. pug sent forth a slowly expanding rope of pulsing

smoke, which moved like a snake. It travelled only a few feet in the first several seconds, but began picking up speed. Then, like a striking cobra, the smoke lashed out and hit the boar thing in the legs. Instantly the smoke became solid, encasing the creature in boots as heavy as led. The thing bellowed in rage as it tried to move. With no ability to retreat, the man-boar was quickly



dispatched by Tomas. Tomas cleaned off his blade. thank you for the help. It was annoying me.' pug smiled, seeing that his boyhood friend still hadn't changed in some ways. He knew Tomas would have dispatched the creature eventually~ but there was no %po~inotminaswwasinticnegdtaims she examined his side. "That axe had some unexpected mystic power to strike while we were ins~u~basrteantbiault not unheard of,' agreed Pug. Tomas closed

his eyes and Pug saw the wound begin to heal. FirSt blood ceased flowing and then the skin gathered itself together. A puckered red scar showed. That began to fade, until unbroken skin was shown. Soon even the golden chain and white tabard were mended. Pug was impressed. He glanced about, feeling discomforted. "This seems

too easy. for: all the fury and noise, these traps are pittiful. Tomas patted his side. 'Not all that pitiful~ but in

general, I agree. I think we are supposed to become overbold and fall prey to incaution.'

'Then let us be wary.'

"now, where next?' Pug looked about. The chamber was carved from

stone, without any aPParent Purpose excePt to Provide a meeting place for several tunnels. Where they led was unknown. Pug sat upon a large rock. 'I will send out my sight.' He closed his eyes and another of the strange whitish spheres apPeared above his head, spinning rapidly. Then suddenly it was off down one of the tUNnels. In a few moments it was back, then down another. After almost an hour Pug recalled the device, and with a wave of his hand it vanished. He opened his eyes. 'The tunnels all lead back upon themselves and empty out here.'

'This is an isolated place?'

Pug got to his feet. 'A labyrinth. A trap for us. no more. Again we must go down.'

They gripped hands and once more Pug allowed them to pass through the solid rock. For what seemed a very long time they moved downward in darkness. Then they were floating just below the roof of a vast cavern. Below and some distance away, a huge lake was surrounded on all sides by a ring of fire, which lit the cavern in a red-orange glow. Beyond the fire, a boat rocked at the edge of the shore, a clear invitation. In the centre of the lake they could see an island, upon the shores of which a host of human-shaped beings waited, all in battle dress. They surrounded a single tower, with but one door on the ground floor and a single window at the top.

pug lowered them to the ground and made them solid again. Tomas looked at the burning circle and said, 'I expect we're supposed to battle through the fire, take the boat, and evade whatever lurks below the water, then defeat all those warriors just to reach the tower.'

'That looks like what we're supposed to do,' said Pug, sounding tired. He walked to the edge of the fire, and said, 'But I think not.' Pug waved his hand in a circular motion, then repeated the gesture a second time. The air began to stir in the cavern, following the circle described by pug's hand, moving along the curve of the vast stone dome above their heads. At first it was a simple gust, a breeze with some life, then quickly a zephyr. Again Pug motioned. Rapidly the wind picked up tempo, and the fire began to dance, illuminating the cavern in mad ~ and flickering shadows. Another gesture from Pug and the wind blew faster and harsher until the fire was being .blown backward. Tomas watched, able to stand against the pressure of the air without difficulty. The fire began to sputter and lapse, as if it could not keep burning before the press of wind. Pug made a larger. circular motion with his arm, almost spinning about with the furious gesture. The water foamed whit%ecaps appeared upon the lake. Wind-whipped ~,.blew high into the air as spindrift leaped in er ran up the shores of the

capering dance and the wale island. Swelling waves rolled, and soon the boat was overturned and sank below the surface, the fire hissing into nothing as the surf swept over the banks. Pug shouted a word, and a clear white light illuminated the cavern in place of the red fire glow. now Pug spun his arm about like a child playing a game, imitating a galeriven windmill. Within minutes the warriors upon the island were staggering back under the force of the wind, unable to keep their footing. One's boot touched the water and something green and leathery rose up and seized the warrior's leg. The screaming fighter was dragged below the water. Again and again this scene was repeated as more and more of the warriors were forced into the water, to be taken by the denizens of the lake. Then, as the windstorm reached a crescendo of fury, shrieking in their ears, Pug and Tomas saw the last figure upon the island stagger backward into the water, to be seized by whatever lay below the frothy surface of the lake. With a clap of his hands, Pug halted the wind and said, 'Come.' Tomas used his ability to fly them over the water's

surface to the door of the tower. They pushed it open and entered.

Pug and Tomas spent a full five minutes discussing what they were likely to discover at the top of the tower. The stairway leading upward was narrow enough so that it could be climbed only single file as it wound along the inside wall of the tower. At last Pug said, "Well, we are as ready as we are ever likely to be. There's nothing to do but go up.' He followed his friend as the white-and-gold clad warrior mounted the steps. Near the top, Pug glanced down and discovered it a fair fall to the stones below as Tomas reached the trapdoor at the top.

Tomas pushed open the door and vanished upward through the opening. Pug followed. There was a single room atop the tower, a simple setting of a bed, a chair, and a window. Sitting on the chair was a man, wearing a brown robe cinched at the waist by a whipcord belt. he sat reading a book, which he closed as Pug joined Tomas. Slowly he smiled.

Pug said, 'Macros.'

Tomas said, 'We've come to take you back.

The sorcerer stood, weakly, as if injured or tired. he faltered as he stepped toward the pair. He staggered. Pug moved forward to catch him, but Tomas was faster. He got his arm about Macros's waist.

Then the sorcerer bellowed an alien sound, as if a roar were being heard through a distant windstorm. His arm contracted, gripping Tomas in a rib shattering hug as the trapdoor slammed shut. For a moment Tomas threw back his head and screamed in agony, then Macros threw him with stunning force against the wall. Pug froze an instant and began to mouth an incantation, but the sorcerer was too quick in moving toward him. The brown-clad figure reached out, picked up Pug with ease, and threw him against the opposite wall. Pug hit with a bone-jarring impact, his head striking stone, and fell hard to the floor. He slumped down, obviously dazed.

Tomas was up, his sword drawn when Macros spun. Then in an instant the sorcerer was gone and a creature of nightmarish aspect stood poised for attack. In outline only was it seen, seven feet high and easily twice Tomas's weight, with large feathered wings extending outward.

As it moved, a vague hint of horns upon the head and large upswept ears could be seen. A featureless charcoal face regarded the Valheru with ruby glowing eyes. Fully cloaked in smoky darkness, it had only a red-orange glow flowing through the eyes and mouth, as if revealing some inner fire. Otherwise it was a thing of ebon shadow, each detail of face and form only a suggestion.

Tomas struck outward with his sword, and the blade passed through the creature without apparent harm.

Tomas retreated as the creature advanced.

'Puny thing,' came a whispering voice, a distant echo caught upon mocking breezes. 'Did you think that which opposes you did not prepare fully for your destruction?' Tomas crouched, sword at the ready. Narrowed eyes under the golden helm regarded the thing as he said, 'What manner of creature are you?'

The whispering voice said, 'I, warrior? I am a child of the void, brother to the wraith and spectre. I am a Master of the dread.' With startling quickness, it reached out and seized Tomas's shield, crushing it with a single twist and ripping it away from him. Tomas swung in answer, but it reached up and gripped his sword arm at the wrist. Tomas howled in pain. 'I am summoned here to end your existence,' said the shadowy thing. Then with ease it yanked and tore Tomas's arm from his shoulder. With a shower of blood, Tomas fell to the stones, screaming in agony.

The thing said, 'I am disappointed. I was warned you were to be feared. But you are as nothing.'

Tomas's face was white and drenched in perspiration, his eyes wide with pain and terror. 'Who. . .' he gasped.

"Who warned you?" "Those who know your nature, man-thing." The dread

stood holding Tomas's arm and sword. 'They even understood how you would come here, rather than seek the sorcerer's true prison.'

'Where is he?' gasped Tomas, seeming on the verge Of fainting. With a whisper of evil the thing said, 'You have

failed.'

Evidently near collapse, Tomas forced himself upright, almost snarling when he spoke. 'Then you don't know. For all your posturing you are nothing but a servant. You know nothing but what the Enemy tells you.' With contempt, he spat, slave.'

With a muted howl of glee, the dread spoke. 'I stand high. I know where the sorcerous one is hidden. He abides where you should have expected: at that place most unlikely to be a prison, therefore the most likely place. He lives in the Garden.'

Suddenly Tomas jumped to his feet, grinning. The thing faltered, for the arm it was holding faded into insubstantiality as it reappeared upon Tomas's body, while the shield untwisted itself with metallic complaint and sped across the room to rest again upon his left arm. The thing moved toward Tomas, but the warrior in white slashed out with his sword with blinding quickness and this time the blade bit with fury, exploding on contact with a spray of golden sparks and a loud hiss. Bitter 'smoke came from the contact, and the creature shrieked its muted cry of pain. 'it seems I am not the only one

given to arrogant presumption,' said Tomas as he drove the thing back with a fury of blows. 'Nor are your masters the only ones capable of casting illusions. Foolish ' thing, don't you know that it was I along with my brethren who cast you and yours from this universe? Do you think that I, Tomas called Ashen-Shugar, fear such as you? I, who once vanquished the Dreadlords?' The thing cowered in terror and anger, its cries distant echoes. Then, with a musical tinkling, glowing clear crystalline gems erupted in the air about the creature. Each elongated rapidly, forming a latticework Of transparent bars around the creature. Tomas grinned as Pug finished the mystic cage about the night black being. The dread lashed out and sounded a muted howl of agony as it touched the transparent bars. Pug got up from where he had feigned unconsciousness and came to stand next to the creature, which attempted to reach between the ~slike bars, but recoiled instantly it touched one. It

shrieked and howled, its alien voice an odd raucous whispering. "What is this thing?' asked Pug. 'A Dreadmaster, one of the Unliving. A thing whose nature is alien even to the essence of our being. It comes from a strange universe at the farthest reaches of time and space, one that only a few beings can breach and survive. It eats the very substance of life, as do all its kind when they enter this universe. It will wither grass should it step upon it. It is a creature of animated destruction, second in power only to the Dreadlords, who are beings even the Valheru are cautious of. That this thing was even brought to the City Forever shows that the Enemy and Murmandamus have callous regard

for the potential destruction they might unleash.' He paused, a look of concern on his face. "It also makes me wonder what more is involved with this Enemy than we have understood so far.' He looked at Pug. 'How are you?'

Pug stretched and said, "I think I broke a rib.'  
Tomas nodded. "It was lucky that was all you broke."

Sorry, but I expected to keep it busy.'  
Pug shrugged and winced. "What do we do with it?' He indicated the softly howling creature.  
'We could drive it back to its own universe , but that would be time consuming. How long will that cage last?  
pug said , "Normally, centuries. Here, perhaps forever, "good,' said Tomas, starting for the door.

A terrified cry erupted from the thing of blackness.  
'No, master!' it shouted. "Don't leave me here I will  
pain!  
wither for ages before I die! It will be constant  
agony, Even now I hunger! Release me and I will serve you  
maSter.'  
Pug said, 'Can we trust it?'  
Tomas said, ~Of course not.  
Pug said, 'I hate to visit torment on anything.'  
'You always did have a tender side to your nature,'  
said Tomas, hurrying down the stairs. Pug came after as  
shrieks and curses followed them. 'Those beings are the  
most destructive in the universes,' said Tomas, 'anti-life.  
Once set free, the common dread are difficult enough to  
deal with, the Dreadmasters are impossible to control.'  
They reached the door and went outside. Tomas said,  
'Do you feel up to getting us back to the surface?'  
Pug stretched slowly, testing his tender side. 'i'll  
manage.'  
He incanted his spell and, holding Tomas's hand, rose  
into the air, insubstantial again as they passed the rock  
ceiling of the cavern. With their departure the only  
sound in the vast cave was the faint inhuman screams  
that came from the top of the tower upon the island.

'What is the Garden?' asked Pug.  
Tomas said, 'it is a place which is of the city, but apart  
from it.' He closed his eyes, and shortly after, Ryath  
descended from the sky. They mounted and Tomas said,  
'Ryath, the Garden.'  
The dragon beat into the sky and soon they were again  
speeding over the odd landscape of the City Forever.  
More alien buildings rolled by beneath them, hinting at  
functions but not revealing them. In the distance, if  
distance could be judged in this impossible place, Pug  
saw seven pillars rising from the city. At first they  
appeared black, but as they drew closer, Pug could see  
ky flecks of light contained within.  
Noticing his interest, Tomas said, "The Star Towers,  
Pug.' He sent a mental command to Ryath, and the  
dragon banked, coming very close to one of the pillars,  
which were arranged in a circle around a mighty, open  
space, easily miles across.  
as they Passed, Pug was astonished to discover that  
the pillars were composed of tiny stars, comets, and  
planets, miniature galaxies swirling within the confines of  
the pillar, locked in a void as black as true space. Tomas  
laughed at Pug's astonishment. 'No, I don't know what  
they are. No one does. It may be art. It may be a tool of  
understanding.' He paused and added, "It may be the  
true universe is contained within those pillars.'

As they flew away, Pug looked back at the Star Towers. 'Another mystery of the City Forever?' Tomas said, 'Yes, and not even the most spectacular. Look there.' He pointed to the horizon, where a red glow could be seen. As they raced toward it, it resolved into a wall of flames, topped by a heat shimmer that distorted everything seen beyond. As they passed over the flames, waves of scorching heat rose to meet them. 'What was that?'

Tomas said, 'A wall of flames. It runs roughly a mile along a straight line. It has no apparent purpose, no reason, no use. It's simply there.'

They continued their flight until they approached land free of buildings of any sort. The dragon descended toward a green area. As they dropped in altitude, Pug could see a dark circular shape outlined against the grey of rift-space, floating at the edge of the city. it is the oddest feature of this very odd place,' said Tomas. 'Had I your discerning nature, I might have thought of the Garden when we first came here. It is a floating place of plants. Assuming Macros's powers could have been neutralized, this is the last place from which he could escape. There are many unexpected treasures hidden throughout the City Forever. Besides gold and other obvious items of wealth, there are alien machines of vast power, arcane items of might, perhaps means to return to true space. But even should means of return to Midkemia exist in the city, Macros can't get there.' Pug looked down. They were a thousand feet above the city and descending rapidly. Beyond the boundaries of the City Forever, the grey of rift-space could be seen. As they approached the border of the Garden, Pug could see misty falls of water descending from several points along the edge. The garden was surrounded by what Pug could think of only as a moat. But instead of water flowing along the edges of the Garden, there was literally nothing - the void of rift-space.

They passed above the edge of the Garden, and Pug could see that somehow a large circle of land floated beside the city. Atop this circle of earth a garden of lush vegetation sat, fully covering every inch of the surface. It brimmed with meandering streams, which spilled over the edge. Fruit trees of every description could be seen. Pug said, 'This is indeed a most improbable place.' Tomas indicated a stone artifact. 'A bridge should stand there.' At once Pug could see that a span had indeed once arched above the moat. It had been shattered, leaving a stone foundation on the ground. Across the moat, the twin of that foundation squatted. "If this place once existed upon some real world, then whoever or whatever brought it here neglected to include

the river that ran around the Garden. With the bridges 'destroyed, there's no way to leave the Garden.' They began a search, skimming over the trees. Not only the varieties known to Pug from Midkemia, but also many he knew from Kelewan were planted there, along with a host of flowers from other worlds, never seen before. They flew past one stand of large tubular plants that began a haunting trilling, almost a musical sound, in the wind from the dragon's wings. They sped above a wint coloured stand of flowers that exploded in white, as seed pods were thrown skyward to drift upon the breeze of their passing. And as Tomas had predicted, other bRidges along the perimeter of the Garden were also shattered. Small animals could be seen scurrying below the brush,

hiding from the potential predator that flew above. Then another shape appeared in the heavens, heading toward them. faster than an arrow's flight, something hurtled

through the sky at them. In the instant before it closed, Ryath bellowed a bone wrenching battle cry. It was answered. A giant black dragon attacked, claws extended, head

craning forward with sheets of fire exploding from its maw. Tomas erected a barrier that prevented Pug and himself from being harmed by the flame.

Ryath answered the attack and the two creatures joined in battle. They grappled with claw and fang as they hovered above the garden. Tomas slashed out with his blade, but could not reach the other dragon. 'This is an ancient beast,' shouted Tomas. "His kind no longer exist upon Midkemia. No greater black has lived there in ages. "Where did it come from?' shouted Pug, but Tomas

seemed unable to hear the question. Pug felt the buffeting of the black's wings, but Tomas's spellcraft was sufficient to keep them both safely seated. They would have difficulty only should Ryath not win the contest, for while Pug thought he had some idea of how the beast flew between worlds, he didn't wish to have to put those theories into practice. If Ryath fell, they might be stranded here. But the golden dragon was equal in might to the black

and Tomas punished the black every time it came close enough to be struck. Pug incanted and launched an attack of his own. As crackling energies struck the enemy dragon, the beast screamed in rage and pain, throwing back its head. Ryath seized the opening and bit upon the black's neck, bringing claws up to rip at the less protected belly. The golden dragon's fangs could only dent the heavy scales of the neck, not break them but



the claws were doing considerable damage to the black's underside. The battle carried the two mighty dragons away from the heart of the Garden, until they hovered near the moat.

Now the black sought to escape, but Ryath's jaws held tight. Pug and Tomas felt the gold falter and begin to be dragged down. Then suddenly they were moving upward again. The black had collapsed, ceasing its hovering. The sudden added weight had pulled Ryath down, but she had released in time to prevent them all from being dragged downward.

Pug watched as the black fell past the edge of the Garden, to vanish into the moat between it and the city. As he watched, the black dragon continued to fall, below the city, until at last it was simply a spot of black against the grey, then at last gone from sight. Pug heard Tomas say, "You fought well, Ryath. I have never ridden one so accomplished, even the mighty Shuruga."

Pug felt the beaming pride the dragon projected as she said, "Thou art fairly spoken, Tomas. I thank thee for thy words. But that one was an ancient mule, one less mighty than I, so it was less a contest than it appeared. Had thou and Pug not crouched upon my back, I would have been less cautious. Still, thou aid and Pug's counted much.

They circled above the island in the sky and began their search again. It was a large place, and the foliage was dense, but at last Pug pointed and shouted, "Tomas!" Tomas followed his friend's direction and there, in the centre of a clearing, a figure jumped up and down, waving his arms above his head. They waved back as Tomas instructed the dragon to descend. The figure staggered back, covering his eyes from the wind the huge wings caused. He was holding a staff and wore the familiar brown homespun. It was Macros. He continued to wave at them as they came to land.

his face registered resignation as the dragon touched ground. There was an odd, strangely quiet moment, and they could hear him sigh. Then he said, "I wish you hadn't done that." The universe collapsed and came crashing down upon

them.

It felt as if the ground had fallen out from under them. Pug staggered a moment, then righted himself and saw Tomas doing the same. Macros leaned upon his staff, looking about, then sat down upon a rock. The falling sensation slowed, then ceased, but the sky above changed, as the grey of rift-space was replaced by a dazzling display of stars in an inky void. Macros said, "You should do something about the air above this

island, Pug. In a moment we'll not have it.'

Pug didn't hesitate, but incanted quickly and closed his eyes. Above them the others could see a faint glowing canopy come into existence. Pug opened his eyes again. Macros said, "Well, you couldn't have known.' Then his eyes narrowed and his voice rose in anger. 'But you should have been clever enough to have anticipated this trap.' Pug and Tomas suddenly both felt such guilt as they

had when boys, being reprimanded by Tomas's father for some failing in the kitchen. Pug shrugged off the feeling and said, "We thought it all right, seeing you waving to US.' Macros closed his eyes and leaned his head against the

staff a moment, then heaved a deep sigh. 'One of the problems with being my age is you look at everyone who is younger as children, and when everyone else around you is younger, it means you live in a universe of children. So you tend to scold more than is proper.' He shook his head. 'I am sorry to be so short with you, I was trying to warn you off. If you'd thought to use one of the abilities you learned from the eldar, we could have spoken despite the noise of the dragon. Then Tomas could have lifted me up to the dragon, and we wouldn't be in this mess.'

Pug and Tomas exchanged guilty glances again. Then Macros said, "Still, there's nothing to be done, and no gain from recriminations. At least you got here on time. Tomas's eyes narrowed. "on time? You knew we were coming?'

Pug said, "Your message to Kulgan and me said you could no longer read the future.'

Macros smiled. 'I lied.'

Pug and Tomas were both mute in astonishment.

Macros stood up and began to pace. "The truth is when I penned my last missive to you, I could see the future, but now I really can't anymore. I lost the ability to know what was to happen when my powers were stripped

away.'

'Your powers are gone?' said Pug, understanding at once what a staggering loss that would be to Macros. Above all others, Macros was the master of magic arts, and Pug could only imagine what it would feel like to be suddenly stripped of that which gave definition to your being, your existence and nature. A magician without magic was a bird without wings. Pug locked eyes with Macros for a moment, and they both knew there was a bond of understanding.

In a lighter tone, Macros said, 'Those that put me here couldn't destroy me - I'm still a tough old walnut - but

they could neutralize me. Now I am powerless.' He pointed to his head. 'But I've my knowledge and you've the power. I can guide you like no other in the universe, pug.' He took a deep breath. "I can gauge the situation based on superior information to that which you presently possess. I know more of what faces us than anyone in the universe, save the gods. I can help.'

'How did you come to this place?' asked Pug.

Macros motioned for them to sit and they did. To Ryath the mage said, 'Daughter of Rhuagh, there is game, though scant, upon this island of plants. If you are clever, you shall not starve.'

The dragon said, 'I shall hunt.' "

'Ware the limit of the protective shell I've erected about the Garden,' warned Pug. '

I shall,' answered the dragon as she took wing.

macros looked at the pair and said, "When you and I closed the rift, Pug, you directed shattering energies for my use. As a by-product of that business, I was suddenly a beacon in the black to that which strove to pierce the

barrier between worlds.'

'The Enemy,' said Pug.

Macros nodded. 'I was seized and a battle ensued.

Fortunately, as powerful as what I face is, I am . . . not without powers of my own.'

Pug said, 'I remember watching you, in the vision upon the Tower of Testing, turning aside the warped rift that threatened to allow the Enemy to regain that world."

Macros shrugged. 'You live long enough, you learn a few things. And I may be unkillable.' The last was said with a note of regret. "In any event, we battled for some time. How long I cannot judge, for, as you've no doubt noticed, time has little meaning between worlds.

"But at last I was forced to take a stand here in the

Garden, and my powers were limited. I could not quite reach the city, for there I have means to augment some of my powers with clever devices. So, we battled to a standstill, until my powers were stripped from me and the trap was set. Then the Enemy destroyed the bridges and left. So I was forced to wait until you arrived.'

"Then why didn't you say something in your last message?' asked Pug. 'We could have come sooner.'

'I couldn't have you two coming after me before it was time. Tomas, you needed to come to terms with yourself, and, Pug, you needed the training only the eldar could give. And I've used the time to some purpose. I've healed some wounds and' - he pointed to his staff - 'I've even taken up wood carving. Though I don't recommend

using rocks as tools. No, everything had to move at its proper pace. Now you are fit weapons for the coming battle.' He looked about. 'if we can manage to escape this trap.' Pug regarded the glowing shell above their heads.

Through it they could see the stars, but there was something odd in the way they appeared, as if they flickered in odd rhythms. "What sort of trap have we encountered?"

'The most clever sort,' said Macros. 'A time trap. The moment you set foot upon the Garden, it was activated. Those who set it are sending us backward in time, at the rate of one day's movement backward for each true day's passing. Right about now, you two are sitting upon the dragon looking for me, I should think. In about five minutes, you'll be battling the black dragon. So on and so forth.'

Tomas said, 'What must we do?'

Macros seemed amused. "do? At present, we are isolated and rendered helpless, for those who oppose us know we did not defeat them in the past, for nature puts limits on such paradox, so our only hope is to break free somehow and return to our proper time . . . before it is too late. '

'How do we do that?' asked Pug.

Sitting again upon the rock, Macros rubbed his beard. That's the problem. I don't know, Pug. I just don't know.'

12

## Messengers

Arutha watched the horizon.

Companies of horsemen galloped toward the gate,

while behind them the sky was thick with dust.

Murmandamus's army was marching on Armengar. The last of those coming from the kraals and steadings were reaching the gates, with herds of cattle and sheep, wagons loaded with crops, all lumbering into the city. With the decline in population over the years' there was ample housing for everyone, even space for livestock. For three days Guy, Amos, Armand de Sevigny, and the other commanders had been leading skirmish parties to slow the advancing columns while those called to Armengar reached the city. Arutha and the others had ridden out with them from time to time, lending aid when possible. At Arutha's side, Baru and Roald watched as the last company of horsemen to quit the field before Murmandmus's

host came thundering out of the dust. Baru said, 'The Protector.' 'One-eye's cutting it close this time,' said Roald

Behind the dashing horsemen, goblins on foot and moredhel cavalry followed closely. The dark elves quickly left their goblin allies behind as they chased Guy's company. But just as they overtook the last rider, archers from another company wheeled and began shooting over Guy's men, raining arrows down upon the moredhel. They broke and retreated and both Armenian companies were again dashing for the gate. Arutha spoke quietly. 'Martin was with them.'

Jimmy and Locklear came hurrying along, Amos a short distance behind. The former sea captain said. 'De Seigny says that if anyone is going to make the run to Yabon, they have to leave tonight. After that, all the patrols in the hills will fall back to the redoubts upon the cliff tops. By midday tomorrow there will be only Dark Brothers and goblins in the hills out there.'

Arutha had at last agreed with Baru's plan to carry word south. 'All right, but I want some last words with Guy before we send anyone. '

'If I know One-eye,' said Amos, 'and I do, he'll be standing by your side within minutes of the gate's closing. '

True to Amos's prediction, as soon as the last stragglers were safely through the gates, Guy was up on the wall studying the approaching army.

He signalled and the bridge across the moat was retracted, slowly disappearing into the foundation of the wall. Looking down, Roald said, 'I was wondering how that would be taken care of. '

Guy motioned toward the now unbroken moat. 'A (drawbridge can be lowered from the outside. This one has a winch below the gatehouse which can be operated only from there.' He said to Arutha, 'We have miscalculated. I thought we'd face only twenty-five thousand or perhaps thirty.'

'How many do you judge?' asked Arutha.

Martin and Briana came up the stairs as Guy said 'closer to fifty.'

'Arutha looked at his brother as Martin said, 'Yes, I've

seen so many goblins and moredhel, Arutha.

they're coming down the slopes and out of the woods

and I don't know. And that's not all. Mountain trolls, ents, and giants.'

Locklear's eyes widened. 'Giants.' he threw Jimmy

and as the older boy elbowed him quiet.

'How many?' asked Amos.

Arutha said, 'it appears several hundred. They stand four

or five feet above the others. In any event, if they are scattered about in equal numbers, several

thousand have come to Murmandamus's banner. Even now the bulk of his army is still in camp north of the Vale of Isbandia, at least a week away. This coming toward us is only the first element. By tonight ten thousand will camp opposite our walls. Within ten days there will be five times as many.'

Arutha looked out over the wall in silence for a while then said, 'So what you're saying is you cannot hold until reinforcements arrive from Yabon.'

"if this were any normal army, I'd say we could,

answered Guy. 'But past experience tells us Murmandnus will bring some tricks to bear. By my best guess he's allowed only four weeks for sacking the city otherwise he won't have enough time to cross the mountains. He's got to flood a dozen lesser passes with soldiers, reform his army on the other side and move straight south to Tyr-Sog. He can't move west to Inclindel, for it would take too long to reach the city and dispose of the garrisons before reinforcements arrive from Yabon City and Loriel. He needs to establish himself in the Kingdom quickly, to ready for a spring campaign. If he tarries here even more than a week beyond that schedule, he risks the possibility of being caught in the mountains with early snows. Time is his biggest enemy now.'

Martin said, 'The dwarves!'

Arutha and Guy looked at the Duke of Crydee.

Martin said, 'Dolgan and Harthorn moot at Stone Mountain with all their kin. There must be two, three thousand dwarves there.'

Guy said, 'Two thousand dwarven warriors could tip the balance until Vandros's heavy foot can cross the mountains from Yabon. Even if we can only hold uP Murmandamus for an additional two weeks, I think his campaign will have to be aborted. Otherwise it's likely he'll have an army stuck in the Yabon Hills in winter.'

Baru looked from Arutha to Guy. "We'll leave an hour after nightfall.'

Martin said, "I'm going with Baru and will travel to Stone Mountain. Dolgan knows me.' With a wry grin he

added, 'i've no doubt he'd be loath to miss this fight.

Then I'll go to Yabon.'

'Can you reach Stone Mountain in two weeks?' asked Guy.

"It will be difficult but possible,' answered the Hadati.

'A small band, moving quickly . . . yes, it is possible.' No one needed to add "barely.' All knew it meant better than thirty miles a day.

Roald said, 'I'd like to try as well. Just in case.' He didn't say what, but everyone knew it was against the possibility that either Martin or Baru would not survive. Arutha had agreed to Martin going with Baru, for the Duke of Crydee was only slightly less gifted travelling through the hills than the Hadati, but the Prince didn't know about Roald. He was about to say no, when Laurie said, 'I'd better go as well. Vandros and his commanders know me, and should the messages be lost, we'll need to do some convincing. Remember, everyone thinks you're dead.'

Arutha's expression darkened. Laurie said, 'We all made it to Moraelin and back, Arutha. We know what it's like to travel in the mountains.'

At last the Prince said, 'I'm not sure it's a good idea, but I don't have a better one.' He looked out at the approaching army. "I don't know how much I believe in prophecy, but if I am the Bane of Darkness, then I must stay and confront Murmandamus.'

Jimmy and Locklear exchanged glances, but Arutha preempted any volunteering. 'You two will stay. This may not be the healthiest of places in a few days, but it's a damn sight safer than scampering across the mountain ridges through Murmandamus's army at night.

Guy said to Martin, 'I'll make sure you have some cover for a while. We'll have enough activity until dawn in the ridges behind the city to cover your escape. Our redoubts above the city still control a good portion of the hills behind Armengar. Murmandamus's cutthroats won't be behind us in strength for several days. Let us hope they'll assume everyone is heading toward the city and won't be too careful in looking for those heading in the other direction.' "We'll leave on foot. Once we're free of patrols, we'll appropriate some horses.'

Arutha's brother and nodded. Martin took

Briana by the arm and left. Arutha knew how much the woman had come to mean to Martin and realized his brother would want to spend his last hours in Armengar with her. Without thinking, Arutha reached out and placed a hand upon Jimmy's shoulder. Jimmy looked up at the Prince then followed his gaze to the plain before the city, where under clouds of rolling dust an army approached.

Martin held Briana closely. They had retired to her quarters for the afternoon. She had left word with her second-in-command she was to be disturbed only in case of grave need. Their lovemaking had been frenzied at first, then gentle. At the last they simply held each other, waiting as the moments slipped by. Martin at last spoke.

"I must go soon. The others will be gathering at the tunnel door into the hills.'

"Martin,' she whispered.

'What?'

"I jUST Wanted tO Say your name.' She studied his face, 'Martin.'

He kissed her and

tasted the salt of tears upon her lips.

She clung to him and said, "Tell me about tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?' Martin felt a sudden, unexpected confusion.

He had laboured to honour her request in not speaking of the future. His elver-tempered nature offered patience, but his feelings for her demanded commitment. He had put aside the conflict that resulted from this contradiction and had lived for the present. He softly said, 'You said we must not think about tomorrow. '

She shook her head. "I know, but now I want to.' She closed her eyes and spoke softly. "I told you once I was a commander, privy to knowledge most of the city are ignorant of. What I know is that we most likely will not hold this city and must needs flee into the hills.' She was silent for a moment, then said, 'Understand, Martin, we know nothing save Armengar. The possibility of living somewhere else never occurred to any here until the Protector came among us. Now I have faint hope. Tell me about tomorrow and the day after and the day after that. Tell me of all the tomorrows. Tell me how it will be.'

' He nestled down into the covers, gently cradling her head' upon his chest, feeling a hot flush of love and Joy rise up within himself. "I will get through the mountains, Bree. There is no one who can stop me. I will bring Dolgan and his kin. That old dwarf would take it stonily if he weren't invited to this battle. We'll hold mermandamus at bay and ruin his campaign for a second year. His army will desert and we'll hunt him down like the rabid animal he is and destroy him. Vandros will bring his army from Yabon to bolster yours and you'll be %You'll have time for your children to be children.'

And what of us?'

ignoring the tears that coursed down his cheeks, he whispered, "You'll leave Armengar and come to Crydee. You will live there with me and we will be happy.'

She cried, "I want to believe.'

He gently pushed her away and lifted her chin. kissing her he said, "Believe, Bree.' His voice was hoarse with emotion. Never in his life had he thought he could feel such bittersweet happiness, for to discover that his love was returned was a joy shrouded by the shadow of coming madness and destruction.



She studied his face, then closed her eyes. "I want to remember you this way. Go, Martin. Don't say anything. quickly he rose and dressed. He silently wiped away

the tears, turning his feelings inward in the elver fashion as he Prepared to face the perils of the trail. With a long last look at her, he quit her chambers. When she heard the door close, she turned her face into the covers and continued to cry softly.

The Patrol moved up toward a canyon. It had ridden out as if making a final sweep of the area before retreating behind the upper redoubts that protected the cliffs above the city. Martin and his three companions crouched down in the shelter of a large rock formation waiting. They had left the city by the secret passage from the keep that cut through the mountain behind Armengar. Reaching a position along the patrol's route, they hid in a narrow draw a short distance from the canyon. Blutark lay silently, Baru's hand upon his head. The Hadati had discovered the source of Armengarian indifference to his possession of the dog. It was the first time a Beasthound had survived its master in the memory of those of armengar, and as the dog seemed to accePt Baru as his master, no one objected.

Martin whispered, 'Wait.'

Long moments dragged by, then the soft footfalls coming out of the darkness could be heard. a squad of goblins hurried by, moving with no light and little noise, as they shadowed the route of the patrol. Martin waited until they vanished down the ravine, then signalled.

At once Baru and Blutark were up, running across the draw. The Hadati jumped to the upper edge of the shallow wash and reached down as Blutark leaped. With a helping hand from the hillman the huge Beasthound cleared the rim of the small depression. Laurie and Roald sprang for the edge, followed a moment later by Martin. Then Baru was leading them along a naked ridge. For terrible long moments they ran in a crouch, exposed to the view of anyone who might look their way, until they could jump down into a small crevice.

Baru looked one way and the other as his companions landed beside him. With a curt nod he led them away, toward the west and Stone Mountain.

For three days they moved, making cold camp at first light, hiding in a cave or in a blind draw, until nightfall, when they would be off again. Knowing the way helped, for they avoided many of the false trails and other paths which would lead them away from the true route. All about them was proof Murmandamus's army was sweeping

the hills, ensuring they were clear of Armengarians. five times in three days they had lain in hiding as mounted or foot patrols passed by. Each time the fact of their hiding motionless, rather than fleeing for Armengar saved them. Arutha had been right. The patrols were looking for stragglers heading for the city, not for strangers on the way out. Martin was sure that was not always going to be the case.

The next day Martin's fears were borne out, for a narrow pass, impossible to get around, was guarded by a party of moredhel. A half-dozen hill-clan moredhel sat about a campfire, while two more were posted as sentries near their horses. Baru had only narrowly avoided being spotted, the warning from Blutark the only reason he had not blundered into view. The Hadati lay back against a boulder, holding up eight fingers. He motioned that two stood atop rocks, and pantomimed looking. He then held up six fingers and squatted, pantomiming eating. Martin nodded. He motioned passing around the position. Baru shook his head. Martin unlimbered his bow. He took out two arrows, putting one between his teeth as he nocked the other. He held up two fingers and pointed to himself, then pointed to the others and nodded. Baru held up six fingers and motioned he understood.

Martin calmly stepped out into view and let fly with his first arrow. One of the dark elves flew backward from the top of his stone perch, while the other started to jump down. He had an arrow in his chest before he landed. Baru and the others were already past Martin, weapons drawn. Baru's blade whistled through the air as he slashed out, killing another moredhel before he could close. Blutark had another down on the ground. Roald and Laurie engaged two others, while Martin dropped his bow and pulled his sword.

The fight was furious, as the moredhel quickly recovered from the surprise. But as Martin engaged another, the sound of hoofbeats could be heard. One moredhel had been left without an opponent and he had chosen to leap to his saddle. He spurred his horse and rode past the attackers before he could be prevented. In short order, Martin and his companions had dispatched the other moredhel and the campsite was silent. 'Damn!' Martin swore.

Baru said, 'It could not be helped.'

'If I'd stayed with my bow, I could have brought him

down. I was impatient,' he said, as if that was the worst possible error. 'Well, there's nothing for it now, as Amos would say. We've their horses, so let's use them. I don't know if there are more camps beyond, but we'll need

speed now, not stealth. That moredhel will be back here shortly with friends.'

'His sort of friends,' Laurie added as he mounted. Roald and Baru were also quickly up and Martin cut the cinches on the remaining three horses. 'They can have the horses, but they'll have to ride them bareback.' The others said nothing, but this petty act of vandalism indicated most clearly how angry Martin was with himself over the moredhel's escape. The Duke of Crydee signed and Baru ordered Blutark out ahead. The dog ran down the trail, and the riders followed quickly after.

The giant turned his head as Martin's arrow struck between the shoulders. The ten-foot-tall creature staggered back as another arrow took him in the neck. His two companions lumbered toward Martin while he fired a third arrow into the stricken giant as he collapsed. Baru had ordered Blutark to stand, for the huge humanoids wielded swords the size of a human greatsword, easily sufficient to cleave the large dog in two with a single blow. For all their shambling movement the hairy creatures could lash out with enough speed to make them very dangerous. Baru ducked to a squat as the sword passed over his head, then lashed out with his sword as he leaped past his towering opponent. In a single stroke he hamstringed the creature, causing it to fall. Between them Roald and Laurie had the third giant on the defensive, and they kept him backing up until Martin could kill him with the bow.

When all three lay dead, Laurie and Roald fetched the horses. Blutark sniffed at the corpses, growling low in his throat. The giants looked roughly manlike, but averaged ten to twelve feet tall. They bulked heavier than a human in proportion and were all uniform with their black hair and beards. The Hadati said, 'The giants are usually %NX from men. What power do you think Murmandmus holds over them?' Martin shook his head. "I don't know. I've heard of

them, and there are some in the mountains near the Free Cities. But the Natalese Rangers also say they avoid contact with others and do not usually cause trouble. Perhaps they are simply no more immune to the blandishments of wealth and power than other creatures . ' "Legend says they were once men such as you or I, but

that something changed them,' commented Baru. As they mounted, Roald said, "That I find difficult to believe.' Martin signalled that the march should resume, and

they rode forward, the second encounter with Murmandmus's guards successfully passed.

Blutark's low growl indicated something up the trail. They were reaching that point above the Inclindel Gap where they would be leaving the ridge and heading down into Yabon. They had covered ground as fast as possible for three days. They were bone-weary, drifting off to sleep in the saddle, but they kept on. The horses were losing weight, for the grain carried by the moredhel had run out two days before, and there was no forage to speak of. They would have to let the animals graze when they reached some grasses, but Martin knew that, with the demands placed upon the animals, they would have to have more than grass if they were to finish out the journey. Still, he was thankful for the horses, for the three days of riding had turned their chances from desperate to fair. Two more days of riding and, even should the horses die, they would be certain to reach Stone Mountain in time. Baru motioned for the others to hold position. He

inched forward along the narrow trail, disappearing around a turn. Martin remained motionless, his bow at the ready, while Laurie and Roald held the mounts. Baru reappeared and motioned them back down the trail. "Trolls," he whispered.

"How many?" asked Laurie. "A full dozen.

Martin swore. 'Can we get around them?' 'if we leave the horses, and move along the ridges there may be a way, but I don't know.' "Try surprise?" asked Roald, knowing what the answer

would be.

'Too many,' said Martin. 'Three to one on a narrow trail? Mountain trolls? Even without weapons, they can bite your arm off. No, we'd better try to move around them. Get what you need from the horses and let them loose back up the trail.' Martin silently cursed the change in luck. Leaving the horses now severely reduced their chances of reaching the dwarves in time.

They stripped what gear they needed and Laurie and Roald led the mounts away, while Baru and Martin kept a keen watch for any signs that the trolls might venture up the trail. Suddenly Laurie and Roald were coming back at a run. 'Dark Brothers,' said Roald.

'How close?' asked Martin.

'Too close to stand here and talk about it,' said Roald as he began climbing the ridges alongside the trail. They scampered up the rocks, the dog able to keep pace, and moved toward the downslope side of the crest, keeping the ridges between themselves and the trail, hoping to bypass the trolls.

They reached a point along the trail where it had suddenly doubled back. Baru looked along its length. He signalled and they moved farther down the slope and jumped back down to the trail. Suddenly they heard diStant shouting. 'The moredhel have reached the trolls and most likely have our mounts.' He signalled and they started to run down the trail.

They ran until their lungs ached, but behind they could hear the sound of riders. Martin dodged around a tall stand of rocks on one side, and shouted, 'Here!' When the others had stopped, he said, "Can you get up there and push those rocks down here?"

Baru leaped and clambered up the side of the trail until he crouched behind the precarious outcropping. He motioned for Laurie and Roald to join him.

Riders came into view and the first spurred his mount when he saw Martin and the dog, the other riders appeared an instant later. The Duke of Crydee quietly drew a bead upon the charging lead rider. Martin let fly as the horseman reached the narrowest part of the trail, and a broad-head shaft struck the charging horse in the chest. The animal went down as if poleaxed and the moredhel rider flew forward over the animal's neck, to hit the ground with back-breaking impact. The second horse struck the fallen one and threw another rider, Martin saw that rider dead with another arrow. Behind, confusion reigned as the horses were thrown into a roadblock of dead animals and riders. Two other horses appeared injured, but Martin couldn't be sure. Then Baru shouted. At once Blutark sprang down the trail. Martin ran after the dog as the sound of rocks coming loose filled the air. With an almost explosive release, the rockslide came down in a torrent. Martin could hear his companions swearing and yelling as a rain of small rocks bounced down the trail beside him.

Martin halted to observe the fall of rock. Dust filled the air, clouding his vision. Then, as the dust began to settle, he could hear Laurie calling his name. He dashed back and began to climb the slide. At the top, hands grabbed him, and through watering eyes he saw Laurie. "Roald," he said, pointing.

The mercenary had lost his footing, sliding down the hillside to land on the wrong side of the rocks blocking the road. He sat with his back to the fall, facing up the trail to where the moredhel and trolls regrouped. 'We'll cover for you,' shouted Martin.

Roald turned and with a grim smile shouted, "Can't. My legs are broken." He pointed to where his legs stretched out before him, and Martin and Laurie could see the blood beginning to pool. Bone was visible through one trouser leg. He sat with his sword in his 'lap,

daggers held ready to throw. 'Get along. I'll hold them up a few minutes. Get away.'

Baru came up beside Laurie and Martin. 'We must get away,' said the Hadati.

Laurie said, "We won't leave you!"

Roald shouted, but his eyes were fixed up the trail where vague shapes moved through the dust. "I always wanted to die a hero. Don't spoil it for me, Laurie. Make up a song. Make up a good one. Now get out of here!"

Baru and Martin pulled Laurie down the rocks, and after a moment, he came willingly. When they reached the place where Blutark waited, Laurie was the first to begin the run down the trail. His face was a grim mask, but his eye's were now dry. Behind they could hear the shouts of the trolls and moredhel, accompanied by cries of pain, and they knew Roald was giving a good account of himself. Then the sounds of struggle ceased.

13

### First blood

Trumpets sounded.

Armengarian bowmen looked out upon the host that stood ready to assault the city. For six days they had waited for the attack, and now it was under way.

Again a goblin trumpeter sounded the call, answered up and down the line by other horns. Drums beat and the order for attack was given. The line of attackers rolled forward, a living wave ready to beat against the walls of Armengar. At first they moved slowly, then as those in the van began to run, the host surged forward. Guy raised his hand and signalled for the catapults to loose their deadly missiles upon those beyond the walls. Stones flew overhead in a high arc, to crash down upon the attackers. Goblins sprang over the bodies of fallen comrades. This was their third assault upon the city since dawn. The first attack had broken before they had reached the wall. The second had carried the attackers to the moat, but there they had broken and run.

They came forward until they were at the limit of the archers' range. Guy ordered the bowmen to fire. A rain of arrows descended upon the goblins and moredhel. Hundreds fell, some dead, others wounded, but all were trampled under the boots of those who came behind. And still they came forward. Orders were given, and scaling ladders were brought up, to be placed upon heavy platforms thrown across the moat. The ladders were raised only to be pushed back by long poles. In futile effort, the goblins were again and again seeking to climb the ladders, while death rained down from above. Guy

signalled and buckets and cauldrons of scalding-hot oil were poured down upon the attackers. The rain of stones, arrows, oil, and flame became too intense for the attackers to survive. Within minutes, trumpets sounded from behind the lines and Murmandamus's forces were in full retreat. Guy ordered a cease-fire.

He looked down at the litter of bodies below the castle, hundreds of dead and wounded. Turning to Amos and Arutha, he said, 'Their commander is without imagination. He wastes lives.'

Amos pointed to where a company of moredhel sat atop a hillock, observing the assault. 'What he does is count our bowmen.'

Guy swore. 'I must be slipping. I didn't see them.'

Arutha said, 'You've gone without sleep for two days. You're tired.'

Guy said, 'And I'm not as young as I used to be.'

Amos laughed. 'You never were.'

Armand de Sevigny came up and reported, 'There's no activity along any sector and the redoubts along the back of the cliff report nothing of note behind us.'

Guy studied the setting sun. 'We'll be done with them for this day. Order the companies down in turn and get them fed. I'll want watches of one in five this night.

We're all tired.'

Guy walked along the wall to the stairs leading downward, the others following. Jimmy and Locklear came hurrying up the stairs, wearing leather armour provided by the Armengarians. Arutha said, 'Pulling first watch?'

'Yes,' said Jimmy. 'We traded with a couple of fellows we met.'

Locklear said, 'The girls are on first watch, too.'

Arutha roughly tousled the grinning Locklear's hair and sent him after Jimmy. Reaching the bottom of the stairs, he said, 'We've got a full-blown war raging around us, and he thinks of girls.'

Amos nodded. 'We were that young once, though I'd be hard pressed to remember that far back. Though, it does remind me of this time I was sailing down the lower Keshian delta, near the Dragonlands. . .'

Arutha smiled as they headed for the common kitchen. Some things had not changed and Amos's storytelling was one of them, and at this time that was a welcome fact

The second day the moredhel and goblin host attacked in the morning and were beaten back without difficulty.

Each time only a single thrust was made, then a retreat. By late afternoon it was clear the besiegers were settling

down. Near sunset, Arutha and Guy watched from the wall, and Amos came running toward them. 'The lookouts on the top of the citadel see movement across the plains behind these lads. Looks like the bulk of Murmandamus's army's' on the march. They should be here by midday tomorrow.'

Guy looked at his two companions. 'it'll take them a full day to get into position. So we gain two more days. But the day after tomorrow, even as dawn comes, he'll hit us with everything he's got.'

The third day passed slowly, while the defenders watched thousands of moredhel soldiers and their allies take position in the camps about the city. After sunset moving lines of torches showed that new companies were still arriving. Throughout the night the sound of marching soldiers filled the dark, and Guy, Amos, Arutha, and Armand repeatedly came to look out upon the sea of campfires across the plain of Armengar.

But the fourth day came and the besieging army only settled in, seemingly willing to bide their time. For the entire day the full army of defenders held to their places upon the walls, waiting for the assault. Near sundown, Arutha said to Amos, 'You don't think they're going to try that Tsurani trick of attacking at night to divert our attention from sappers?'

Amos shook his head. 'They're not that clever. They wanted Segersen's boys because they don't have engineers. If they've got sappers tunnelling under these walls, I'd like to meet those lads: they'd have to be rockating gophers. No, they're up to something, but nothing fancy. I just think his grand bastardhood has no sense he's got trouble here. That arrogant swine-lover plans on overrunning us in one attack. That's what I think.'

Guy listened, but his good eye was fixed upon the mass of enemies who camped upon the plain. At last he said, 'We gain another day for your brother to get to Stone

Mountain, Arutha.' Martin and the others had been gone ten days now.

'There is that,' agreed Amos. They watched in silence as the sun set behind the mountains. They remained watching until darkness had completely taken hold, then slowly they left the wall to eat and, if possible, to rest.

At dawn a thunderous cheer erupted from the besieging host, a mixture of shouts, shrieks, the rattle of drums, and the blowing of horns. But instead of the anticipated attack, the van of the army opened and a large platform rolled forward. It was moved by the strength of a dozen giants, the tall hairy creatures pushing it effortlessly.



Upon the platform rested a gold encrusted throne, upon which sat a single moredhel dressed in a short white robe. Behind him crouched a figure whose features were hidden by a bulky robe and deep hood. The platform came toward the wall at a leisurely pace.

Guy leaned forward, his arm resting upon the blue stones of the wall, while Arutha stood at his side, arms crossed. Amos shaded his eyes with his hands against the rising sun. The seaman spat over the wall. 'I think we finally meet the grand high royal bastard himself.'

Guy only nodded. A company subcommander came up and said, 'Protector, the enemy takes position opposite all sectors of the wall.'

'Any attempt to reach the mountain redoubts?' Guy indicated the section of cliff behind the citadel.

'Armand reports only weak thrusts toward the outposts in the rocks. They seem unwilling to climb and fight.'

Guy nodded and returned his attention to the field. The platform halted and the figure on the throne stood. By some act of magic his voice filled the air, heard by everyone on the wall as if he were standing only a few feet away. 'O my children,' he said, 'hear my words.'

Arutha looked at Amos and Guy in wonder, for this Murmandamus spoke music. The very sounds of his words were etched with the warmth of a lute's melody.

"We share the destiny of tomorrow. Stand in opposition

to fate's will and you risk utter destruction. Come, come. Let old differences be put aside.'

He signalled and a company of human riders came trotting up to stand behind him. 'Here, can you see? With me already are those of your kindred who understand our destiny. I welcome all who will willingly serve. With me you shall find a place of greatness. Come.

come, let us put aside the past. You are but my misguided children.' Amos snorted. 'My old pa was a scoundrel, but that's

an insult. 'Come, I welcome any who will join.' His words were

sweet, seductive and those on the walls exchanged glances, and unspoken questions.

Guy and Arutha looked about, and du Bas-Tyra said, 'There's art and power in his voice. Look, my own soldiers are thinking maybe they won't have to fight.'

Amos said, "Ready catapults.'

Arutha stepped beside him. 'Wait!'

'For what?' asked Guy. 'So he can sap the resolve of my army?' 'Stall for time. Time is our ally, and his enemy.'

Murmandamus shouted, 'But those who oppose, those who will not stand aside and who block our march

toward destiny, those shall be crushed utterly.' Now, the tone of his voice carried a warning, a note of

menace, and those upon the walls were visited by a feeling of utter futility. 'I give you a choice' He stretched his arms away from his body, and his short white robe fell away, revealing a body of incredible power, with the purple dragon birthmark clearly seen. He wore only a white loincloth. 'You may have peace and serve in the cause of destiny.' Servants ran forward and quickly fitted his armour to his body: iron plates and greaves, chain and leather, a black helm, with the upswept wings of a dragon on either side. Then the human riders moved away. and behind, a full company of Black Slayers could be seen. They rode forward and assumed positions about Murmandamus. Murmandamus took up a sword and pointed it toward the wall. 'But if you resist, you will be obliterated. Choose.'

Arutha whispered in Guy's ear. At last the Protector shouted back, 'I may not order any to quit the city. We must meet in volksraad. We will decide tonight.'

Murmandamus paused, as if the answer was unexpected. He began to speak but was interrupted by the serpent priest. With a curt gesture he silenced the priest. Turning back toward the wall, Arutha imagined he could see a smile below the eye guards of Murmandamus's black helm. "I will wait. At first light tomorrow, open the gates of the city and come forth. You will be embraced as returning brethren, o my children.' He signalled and the giants pulled back the platform. In a few moments he had vanished into the huge host.

Guy shook his head. 'The volksraad will not do anything. I will knock down any fool who thinks there is a single shred of truth in that monster's words.'

Amos said, 'Still we gain another day.'

Arutha leaned back against the wall. 'And Martin and the others are one day closer to Stone Mountain.'

Guy remained silent, watching as the morning sun rose, and as the besieging army stood down, returning to camp, but still isolating the city. For hours the Protector and his commanders just watched.

Torches burned brightly all along the wall. Soldiers kept vigil on all fronts, under the command of Armand de Sevigny. The bulk of the populace assembled in the great market. Jimmy and Locklear moved through the crowd. They

found Krinsta and Bronwynn and moved alongside the girls. Jimmy began to speak, but Krinsta motioned for silence as Guy, Arutha, and Amos stepped onto the platform. With them stood an old man, dressed in a brown robe that appeared as ancient as its wearer. He

held an ornate staff, incised with scrollwork and runic symbols along its entire length, in the crook of his arm. 'Who's he?' asked Locklear. 'The Lawkeeper,' whispered Bronwynn. "Hush.'

The old man raised his free hand and the crowd became silent. 'The volksraad meets. Hear, then, the law. What is spoken is true. What is counselled is heeded. What is decided is the will of the folk.' Guy raised his hands above his head. He spoke. "into my care you have given this city. I am' your Protector. I now counsel this: our foe awaits without and seeks to gain with fine-sounding words what he will not gain by strength of arms. Who will speak to his cause?' A voice from the crowd said, "Long have the moredhel been the enemies of our blood. What service can we take in their cause?' Another answered, 'Still, may we not hear again this

Murmandamus? He speaks fairly.' All eyes turned toward the Lawkeeper. The Lawkeeper closed his eyes and was silent for a

time. Then he spoke. 'The Law says that the moredhel are beyond the conventions of men. They have no bond with the folk. But in the Fifteenth Year the Protector Bekinsmaan did meet with one called Turanalor, chieftain of the Clan Badger moredhel in the Vale of Isbandia, and a truce during Banapis was established. It lasted for three midsummers. When Turanalor vanished in the Edder Forest, during the Nineteenth Year, his brother, Ulmslascor, became chieftain of Clan Badger. He violated the truce, killing the entire population of Dibria's Kraal.' He seemed to evaluate the traditions as he knew them. 'it is not unprecedented to listen to the words of the moredhel, but caution is urged, for they are treacherous.'

Guy motioned toward Arutha. "This man you have seen. He is Arutha, a prince of the Kingdom that once you counted enemy. He is now our friend. He is a distant kinsman of mine. He has had dealings with Murmandamus before. He is not of Armengar. Will he be given voice in the volksraad?'

The Lawkeeper raised his hand in question. A chorus of affirmation sounded, and the Lawkeeper indicated the Prince could speak. Arutha stepped forward. "I have battled against this fiend's minions before.' In simple words he spoke of the Nighthawks, the wounding of Anita, and the journey to Moraelin. He spoke of the moredhel chieftain, Murad, who was slain by Baru. He spoke of the terrors and evils seen, all fashioned by Murmandamus. When he was done, Amos raised his hands and spoke. 'I came to you sick and wounded. You cared for me, a

stranger. Now I am one of you. I speak of this man Arutha. I lived with him, fought beside him, and learned to count him friend for four years. He is without guile. he has a generous heart and his words can be counted as bond. What he has said can only be the truth.'

Guy shouted, "What can our answer be?"

Swords were lifted and torches brandished as a chorus of shouts echoed across the great market. 'No.'

Guy waited while the host of Armengar cried out their defiance to Murmandamus. He stood with hands dsteu, black gauntlets held high above his head while the sound of Armengar's thousands washed over him. His single eye seemed alight and his face was alive, as if the courage of the city's populace was sweeping away his fatigue and sorrows. To Jimmy, he looked a man renewed. The Lawkeeper waited until the din died, then said,

'The volksraad has decreed the law. This is the law: no man will quit the city to serve this Murmandamus. Let no man violate the law.' Guy said, "Return to your places. Tomorrow the battle

begins in earnest.' The crowd began to disperse and Jimmy said, 'I didn't

doubt this would happen for a minute.'

Locklear said, 'Still, that Dark Brother with the beauty mark has a way with words.'

Bronwynn said, "True, but we have fought the moredhel since the beginning of Armengar. There can be no peace between us.' She looked at Locklear, a serious expression on her pretty face. "When are you to report?" He said, 'Jimmy and I have duty at first light.'

She and Krinsta exchanged glances and nods. Bronwynn took Locklear by the hand. "Come with me.'

'Where?'

'I have a house we may stay in tonight.' Firmly she led him away from his friend, through the evaporating press of the volksraad.

Jimmy glanced at Krinsta. 'He's never -'

She said, 'Neither has Bronwynn. She has decided if she is to die tomorrow, she will at least know one man.'

Jimmy thought a moment. 'Well, at least she's picked a gentle lad. They'll be good to each other.'

Jimmy began to move and was halted by Krinsta's restraining hand. He looked back to find her studying his face in the torchlight. 'I also have not known the pleasures of the bedchamber,' she said.

Jimmy suddenly felt the blood rise in his face. For all the time spent together, Jimmy had never been able to get Krinsta off alone. The four had spent hours together, with some mock passion in dark doorways, but the girls had always managed to keep the two squires under

control. And always there had been a sense that it was all somehow play. Now, suddenly, Jimmy knew there was no more play. There was a serious note of approaching doom and a desire to live more intensely, even if only for one night. At last he said, 'I have, but only twice.' She took his hand. 'I also have a house we may use.' gently she led Jimmy away. As he followed he was aware of a new feeling inside. He felt a sense of the inevitability of death, for it had been etched in bold relief against this desire to affirm life. And with it came fear. Jimmy squeezed Krinsta's hand tightly as he walked with her.

Couriers raced along the wall, carrying messages. The Armengarian tactic was simple. They waited. As dawn broke, they had seen Murmandamus ride forth, his white horse prancing as it moved back and forth before his assembled host. It was clear he waited for an answer. The only answer he received was silence. Arutha had convinced Guy to do nothing. Each hour gained before the attack was another hour relief might be coming. If Murmandamus expected the gates to open, or a defiant challenge, he was disappointed, for only the sight of silent lines of Armengarian defenders 'atop the wall greeted him. At last he rode forward, until he stood at midpoint between his army and the walls. Again by arcane arts his voice could be clearly heard. 'O my reluctant children, why do you hesitate? Have you not taken counsel? Do you not see the folly in opposing? What, then, is your answer?' Silence was his only reply. Guy had given orders that no one was to speak above a whisper, so that any who were tempted to shout taunts would be halted. There would be no excuse for Murmandamus to order an attack one moment before necessary. Again the horse pranced in a circle. "I must know!" shrieked Murmandamus. "If an answer is not forthcoming by the time I return to the lines of my host, then shall death and fire be visited upon you." Guy slammed his gloved fist against the walls. "Damn

me if I'll wait five more minutes. Catapults!" By signal he ordered them fired. A hail of stones the size of melons arced overhead and came crashing down about Murmandamus. The white stallion was struck and collapsed in a bloody shower. Murmandamus rolled free and was struck repeatedly by stones. A wild cheer went up from the walls. Then it died as Murmandamus regained his feet.

Unmarked, he strode toward the walls, until he was within bow range. "Spurn my largess and my bounty. Refuse my dominion. Then know destruction."

Archers fired, but the arrows bounced away' from the moredhel as if he were enveloped in some sort of protective shell. He pointed his sword and a strange, dull explosive sound came from it as blasts of scarlet fire shot forth. The first blast erupted along the edge of the walls. and three archers screamed in agony as their very bodies exploded in flames. Others ducked below the wall as blast after blast struck. With the entire force of defenders crouching, no further damage was sustained. With a bellow of rage, Murmandamus turned to face his army and shrieked, 'Destroy them!' Guy glanced over a crenel and saw the moredhel

striding away while his army poured across the plain past him. Like a calm island in a sea of chaos he walked back toward the waiting platform and throne.

Then Guy ordered the war engines loosed, and a rain of destruction began. The assaulting forces faltered, but regained momentum as they approached the walls. The moat had been cluttered with debris and platforms from earlier assaults, and again more platforms were thrown across the water. More scaling ladders were lifted and again attackers swarmed upward.

Giants ran forward, pushing odd-looking boxes, some twenty feet on a side and ten feet high. These rolled on wheeled platforms, with long poles extending to the front and rear, bumping over the rough terrain and fallen bodies. When they were near the wall, some mechanism was triggered, for the poles moved under the boxes, lifting them upward to a level with the top of the wall. Suddenly the fronts of the boxes fell forward, forming a platform, and goblins came swarming out to stand upon the walls of Armengar, while rope ladders were lowered from the boxes so more invaders might climb up. At dozens of points along the wall, this tactic was repeated until hundreds of moredhel, goblins, and trolls fought in bloody hand-to-hand combat with the defenders of the city.

Arutha dodged a blow by a goblin and ran the greenskinned creature through, causing it to fall screaming to .the stones of the bailey below. Armengarian children ran forward with drawn daggers and ensured the creature was dead. Everyone who could serve in the battle did so. The Prince of Krondor ran past Amos, who struggled with a moredhel, each holding the other's wrist. Arutha hit the moredhel in the head with his hilt and continued to move along the wall. The dark elf staggered and Amos grabbed it by the throat and crotch. He lifted and tossed the creature over the wall, knocking down several more attempting to climb a ladder. He and another defender then pushed the ladder away from the wall.

. ' Jimmy and Locklear dashed along the wall, dealing

blows were needed to win past attackers who sought to slow them. Reaching the point where Guy had his command, Jimmy said, 'Sir, Armand says there is a second wave of those boxes coming forward.'

Guy turned to look at his defence. The walls were being swept clear of attackers and almost all the ladders had been overturned. 'Poles and burning oil!' he shouted and the command was passed along the wall.

When the second wave of boxes rose to the wall, long poles, pole arms, and spears were used to hold the falling front sections up, though several attempts to do so failed. But those that held were followed by leather bags of oil, which were tossed by strong-armed Armengarians upon the sides of the boxes. They were fired by burning arrows and quickly the boxes were ablaze. Screaming attackers jumped to their death below rather than burn inside the boxes. Those few companies of moredhel who gained the

walls were quickly disposed of, and within an hour of the first assault the retreat sounded from the field.

Arutha looked about and turned to Guy. The Protector was breathing heavily, more from tension than from the fighting. His command position had been heavily defended so he could issue orders along the walls. He looked back at the Prince. "We were lucky." Rubbing his face with his hands, he said, 'Had that fool sent both waves at once, he could have cleared a section before we knew what to do. We'd be retreating through the streets.

Arutha said, "Perhaps, but you've a good army here, and they fought well."

Guy sounded angry. 'Yes, they fought well, and they die damn well, too. The problem is keeping them alive.' Turning to Jimmy and Locklear and several other couriers, he said, 'Call officers to the forward command post Ten minutes.' He said to Arutha, 'I'd like you there too.' Arutha washed his bloody arms in fresh water provided by an old man pulling a cart full of buckets, and said, 'Of course.'

They left the walls and descended the stairs to a home that had been converted to Guy's forward command post. Within minutes every company commander and Amos and Armand were in his presence.

As soon as everyone was there, Guy said, 'Two things. First, I don't know how many such assaults we can safely repel, or if they have the capacity for another like the last. Had they been a little more intelligent in their use of those damn boxes, we'd be fighting them in the streets now. We might repulse a dozen more such attacks, or the next could finish us. I want the city evacuation begun at once. The first two stages are to be finished by midnight.'

Horses and provisions to the canyons, and the children 'made ready. And I want the final two stages ready at my command anytime after. Second, should anything occur, the order of command after me will be Amos Trask, Armand de Sevigny, and Prince Arutha.'

Arutha half expected the Armengarian commanders to protest, but without a word they left to begin the work ordered. Guy interrupted Arutha before he could speak. 'You're a better field commander than any of the city men, Arutha. And if we must quit the city, you may find yourself in charge of one portion or another of the populace. I want it known you are to be obeyed. This 'way, even if one of the local commanders be with you your orders will be followed.'

'Why?'

'Moving toward the door, Guy said, 'So that perhaps a few more of my people can get to Yabon alive. Come along, just in case, you should know what we're planning

here. '

the second major assault began while Guy was showing Arutha the deployment of units in the citadel, against the fall of the city proper. They rushed back to the walls, while old men and women were rolling barrels through the streets. As they reached the outer bailey, Arutha saw dozens of barrels being placed at each corner.

They reached the top of the wall, finding heavy fighting along every foot. Blazing boxes teetered in the breeze a short distance from the walls, but no company of moredhel, goblin, or troll had safely passed the %par GRaining his command post, Guy found Amos supervising the deployment of reserve companies. Without waiting for Guy's request, Amos began relating the situation. 'We've had two dozen more of those box contraptions rolled out. This time we shot them full of fire arrows and heaved the oil after, so they went uP farther away from the walls. Our lads are Peppering them heavily and we should take their measure this time. His unholy bastardness is fit to be tied.' He pointed to the distant hill where Murmandamus sat. It was difficult

to see, but there was a vague hint the moredhel leader was less than pleased with the assault. Arutha wished for Martin's hunter's eye, for he couldn't quite see what Murmandamus was doing. Then Amos shouted, 'Down. all down.' Arutha

crouched below the merlons on the wall as Amos's warning was echoed by others, and again scarlet fire exploded over their heads. Another blast followed, then a third. The distant sound of trumpets could be heard



and Arutha chanced a glimpse over the wall. The surrounding army was in retreat, heading back for the safety of their own lines. Guy got up and said, 'Look.' All below them, incinerated corpses lay, smoking from the blast of Murmandamus's mystic flames. Amos surveyed the damage and said. "He doesn't take too kindly to defeat, does he?"

Arutha studied the walls. "He's killed his own soldiers and done little harm to ours. What manner of enemy is this?"

Amos placed his hand upon Arutha's shoulder. 'The worst sort. Insane.'

Smoke covered the field and the defenders almost collapsed from fatigue and lack of clean air. Large constructions of wood and brush, fashioned in such a manner as to allow quick ignition, had been brought forward on wagons and placed before the walls. They had been set afire and had sent up a foul black smoke. ~ different manner of scaling had been attempted, long ladders set atop platforms. Companies of goblins ran forward carrying these. To the defenders it seemed a wall of black smoke had obscured the air, then suddenly a ladder would loom out of the smoke before them. While they vainly tried to push aside the fixed ladders, attackers swarmed up them. The attackers wore cloths over their mouths and noses, treated with some mixture of oils and herbs, which filtered out the smoke. Several positions along the wall were overrun, but Arutha helped direct reinforcements, which soon pushed the attackers back. Guy had ordered naphtha poured down upon the fires, causing them to explode beyond the ability of the attackers to control. Soon an inferno blazed at the base of the wall, and those upon the platform ladders were left to die in burning agony. When the fire had at last died down, not a ladder was left intact.

The late afternoon sun sank behind the citadel and Guy motioned Arutha to his side. 'I think they're done for the day.'

Arutha said, 'I don't know. Look how they stand.'

Guy saw that the attacking host had not retired to camps as they had before. Now they reformed in attack positions, their commanders moving before them, directing replacements into the line. 'They can't mean to attack at night, can they?'

Amos and Armand had approached. "Why not?" said Amos. "The way they're throwing their men at us. it matters little who can see who. The silly swine-lover doesn't give a spit for who lives and who dies. It'll be pure butchery, but they may wear us down.' Armand surveyed the wall. The wounded and dead

were being carried down to infirmaries set up within the city. 'We've lost a total of three hundred twenty soldiers today. We may find the number higher when all the reports are re-checked. That leaves us with a standing force of six thousand two hundred and about twenty guy swore. 'if Martin and the others reach Stone

Mountain in the fastest possible time and get back here as fast, it will not be soon enough. And it seems our friends out there have something planned for tonight.' Arutha leaned against the stones of the wall. 'They don't seem to be readying for another assault.' Guy looked back toward the citadel. The sun was now behind the mountains, but the sky was still bright, Banners and torches could both be seen on the plain before the city. 'They seem to be waiting . . . Guy said, "Have the companies stand down, but feed them at the forward positions.' He and de Sevigny left without ordering a sharp watch. There was no need. Arutha remained on the wall with Amos. He felt some strange sense of anticipation, as if the time for him to play his part, whatever that would prove to be, was rapidly approaching. If the ancient prophecy told him by the Ishapians at Sarth was true, he was the Bane of Darkness and it would fall to him to defeat Murmandamus. He rested his chin on his arms, upon the cold stones of the wall. Amos took out a pipe and began filling it with tabac, humming a sea charity. As they %

"Locky, no,' said Bronwynn, pushing the boy away. Looking confused, the squire said, "But we're off duty.'

The tired girl said, 'i've been running messages all day, the same as you. I'm hot and sticky, covered with dirt and smoke, and you want to lie with me.'

Locklear's voice betrayed a note of hurt. 'But . . . last night.'

"Was last night,' said the girl gently. "That was

something I wanted, and I thank you for it. But now I'm tired and dirty, and not in the mood.'

Stiffly the boy said, 'Thank you Was that a favour?' His wounded pride showed and his voice was thick with youthful emotion. 'I love you, Bronwynn. When this is over you must come with me to Krondor. I'm going to be a rich man someday. We can be married.'

Half-impatiently, half-tenderly, the girl said, 'locky, you speak of things I don't understand. The pleasures of the bedchamber are . . . not promises. Now I must rest

before we are called back to duty. Go. Maybe some other time. '

Feeling stung, the boy backed away, his cheeks burning. 'What do you mean, some other time?' Colour rose in his face as he almost shouted. 'You think this is some game, don't you. You think I'm just a boy.' He spoke defiantly.

Bronwynn looked at him with sadness in her eyes.

"yes, Locky. You're a boy. Now go.'

His temper rising, Locky shouted, 'I'm no damn boy, Bronwynn. You'll see. You're not the only girl in 'Armengar. I don't need you.' Awkwardly he stepped through the door, slamming it behind him. Tears of humiliation and anger ran down his cheeks. His stomach churned with cold fury and his heart raced. Never in his life had he felt so much confusion and pain. Then he heard Bronwynn shout his name. He hesitated a moment, thinking the girl might want to apologize, or afraid she might simply want him for some errand. Then she screamed. Locklear pushed open the door and saw the girl

clutching her ribs while she awkwardly held a dagger in her hand. Blood poured down her arm and along her side and thigh. Before her crouched a mountain troll, his sword upraised. Locklear's hand flew to his rapier as he shouted, 'Bronwynn!' the troll faltered as the boy leaped toward him, but even as Locklear raised his own weapon, the troll's blade came down.

In blind rage Locklear slashed out, cutting the troll across the back of the neck. The creature staggered and attempted to turn, but the boy ran it through, the point of the rapier finding a place under the arm where no armour protected the creature. The troll shuddered and its sword fell from limp fingers as it collapsed to the floor. Locklear stabbed it one more time, then was past it to

Bronwynn's side. The girl lay in a pool of blood and instantly Locklear knew she was dead. Tears ran down the boy's face as he cradled her in his arms, hugging her close. "I'm sorry, Bronwynn. I'm sorry I was mad," he whispered in the dead girl's ear. 'Don't be dead. I'll be your friend. I didn't mean to shout. Damn!' he rocked back and forth as Bronwynn's blood ran down his arms.

"Damn, damn, damn." Locklear wept aloud, his pain a hot iron in his stomach

and groin, his heart pounding and his muscles knotted. His skin flushed, as if hatred and rage sought to leach through the pores of his skin, and his eyes seemed to burn inside his head, suddenly too hot and dry for tears. Then the sound of alarm brought him from his private grief. He rose and gently placed the girl upon the bed

they had shared the night before. Then he took his rapier and opened the door. He took a deep breath, and something froze inside him, as if mountain ice replaced the burning agony of the moment before.

Before him a woman held a child as a goblin advanced, his sword upraised. Locklear stepped calmly forward and ran the goblin through the side of the neck, twisting his sword savagely, so the creature's head fell from his shoulders. Locklear looked about and saw a brief shimmer in the night air, and suddenly a moredhel warrior appeared before him. Without hesitation Locklear attacked. The moredhel took a wound in the side but managed to avoid being killed by the boy. Still the wound had been serious and Locklear was a swordsman of above-average skill. And now he had come to command a cold, controlled rage, a disregard for his own safety that made him the most fearful of opponents, one willing to take risks because he didn't care if he lived. With astonishing fury the boy drove the moredhel back to the wall of the building and ran him through. Locklear spun about, looking for another opponent, and saw another form appear in the street a half block down. The boy ran toward the goblin.

Everywhere in the city, the invaders suddenly appeared. Once the alarm had been sounded, the defenders had dealt with them, but a few goblins and moredhel had joined in force and were now fighting from 'pockets within the city. As the invasion of magically transported warriors reached its peak, the army outside' the walls attacked. Suddenly there was the risk of enough soldiers being pulled from the walls to deal with the teleported soldiers to allow those without to find a point of defence they could breach.

Guy ordered one reinforcement company to the point of heaviest attack upon the wall, and another off the wall to aid those in the city. Hot oil and arrows quickly turned back those at the wall, but the constant appearances within the city continued. Arutha fought off numbing fatigue and watched his father's most bitter rival, wondering how the man found the reserve of strength to carry on. He was a much older man, yet Arutha found himself envying Guy his energy. And the speed with which he made decisions showed a complete understanding of where every unit at his disposal was at any time. Arutha still couldn't bring himself to like this man, but he respected him and, more than he cared to admit, even admired him. Guy watched the distant hill, the place where Murmandamus oversaw his army. There was a faint flicker of light, after a moment, another, then a third. Arutha followed Guy's gaze and, after witnessing the lights for a

time, said, "That's where they're coming from?"  
'I'd bet on it. That witch-king or his snake priest is  
behind this.' Arutha said, 'He's too far for even Martin's bow, and

I'll wager none of your archers can reach him. Nor can  
your catapults.'

'The bastard's just out of range.'

Amos came along the wall to say, 'Things seem to be  
under control, but they keep Popping up everywhere.  
I've a report of three in the citadel, and one appeared in  
the moat and sank like a stone, now What are you  
looking at?' Arutha indicated the hill and Amos watched for a

while. 'Our catapults can't reach it. Damn.' Then the old  
seaman's face split in a grin. 'I've an idea.'

Guy waved toward the bailey, where an astonished  
looking troll had suddenly appeared, to be overwhelmed  
by three soldiers. But while he died, another came into  
existence and dashed away down a street. 'Anything.  
Sooner or later, they're going to gather into a large  
enough company to cause serious trouble.'

Amos hurried away, toward a catapult platform. He  
issued instructions and soon a cauldron was heating. He  
oversaw the preparations and returned. Leaning upon  
the wall, he said, "Anytime now.'

"What?" said Guy.

'The wind will change. Always does this time of night.'  
Arutha shook his head. He was tired and suddenly was  
visited with a funny image. 'Are we going to sail closer,  
Captain?'

Abruptly a troll was upon the rampart, blinking in  
confusion. Guy struck it with the back of his fist  
knocking it to the cobbles far below. It landed with a  
thump of finality. 'It seems they have a moment or two  
of disorientation, which is a damn good thing,' said the  
Protector. 'Otherwise that one might have had your leg  
for lunch, Amos.'

Amos stuck a finger in his mouth, then raised it. With  
a satisfied 'Ah' he shouted, 'Catapult, Fire!'

The mighty war engine uncoiled, throwing its missile  
with such force as to make it leap upon the wall. Into the  
dark the missile silently sped.

For a long moment no effect was visible, then shrieks  
filled the night from the distance. Amos let out a satisfied  
howl of glee. Arutha watched for a moment and saw no  
more flashes of light. 'Amos, what did you do?' asked  
Guy.

'Well, One-eye, it's a trick I learned from your old  
friends the Keshians. I was in Durbin when a tribe of  
desertmen had an uprising and decided to take the city.  
The governor-general, that old fox Hazara-Khan, found

the walls being swept with bow fire, so he ordered up hot sand and threw it at them.'

'Hot sand?' said Arutha.

'Yes, you just heat it until it glows red and toss it at them. The wind carries it a fair piece, and if it hasn't cooled too much when it hits - it burns like unholy blazes. Gets in your armour, under your tunic, in your boots, your hair, everywhere. If Murmandamus was looking this way, we might have blinded the impotent son of a poxy rat. Anyway, it'll take his mind off spells for an hour or two.' Arutha laughed. 'I think only for a time, however.'

Amos took a pipe from his tunic and a taper which he lit from a torch. 'Yes, there's that.' His tone turned serious. 'There is that.' The three looked out again into the dark, seeking some sign of what would be next. 14

## Destruction

The wind blew dust across the wall. Arutha squinted as he watched riders move along the lines of the assembled host, heading for Murmandamus's banner. The attacks had continued unabated for three days before ceasing. Some sort of war council was being held in Murmandamus's camp, or so it seemed to Arutha. For an hour the conference had been taking place.

Arutha considered the situation. The last assaults had been intense, as much as any before. But they had lacked the disquieting element of the sudden appearance by those warriors transported by magic inside the walls. The lack of magic assaults had Arutha puzzled. He speculated there was some compelling reason for Murmandamus not to use his arts again, or some limit on what he was able to do for any length of time. Still, Arutha suspected something was about to break for Murmandamus to be calling all his chieftains together.

Amos wandered along the wall, inspecting the soldiers on duty. It was late in the day, and already men were relaxing, for it was apparent there would be little chance of attack before morning. The enemy's camp was not standing ready, and it would take hours for them to muster. Amos reached Arutha's side and said, 'So, then if this was your command, what would you be doing?' 'Had I the men, I'd roll out the bridge, sally forth, and hit them before they could marshal their forces. Murmandamus pitches his command post far too close to the front, and without apparent thought a company of 'goblins has been moved down the line, leaving an almost clear path to his pavilion. Lead with mounted archers and with luck you could have several of his captains dead

'before they could organize resistance. By the time they were roused, I'd be back inside the city.'

Amos grinned. 'Well, what a bright lad you are, highness. If you want, you can come play with us.'

. Arutha regarded Amos questioningly, and the seaman inclined his head. Arutha looked past him to the bailey and saw horsemen riding into position before the inner edge of the barbican. "Come along. I've an extra horse for you.'

Arutha followed Amos down the stairs to the waiting horses. 'And what if Murmandamus has another magic trick to toss at us?'

..~"then we will all die and Guy will be sad for having lost the best company he's had in the last twenty years."

Amos mounted. 'You worry too much, lad. Have I ever told you that?' Arutha smiled his crooked half-smile as he mounted.

Guy, waiting by the gates, said, 'Be doubly careful. If you hurt them, fine, but no heroic suicide assaults just on the chance to get at Murmandamus. We need you back.'

Amos laughed. "one-eye, I'm the last candidate for hero you're ever likely to meet.' He signalled and the inner gate was opened. The rumble of the bridge being run out could be heard as the inner gate closed. Suddenly the outer gate swung open and Amos was leading the company out. Quickly outriders took their position on the flanks as the main element of Amos's force advanced upon the besieging army. At first it was as if the enemy didn't understand that a sally was being undertaken, for no alarm was given. They were almost upon the first elements of Murmandamus's army when a trumpet sounded. By the time the goblins and trolls were scrambling for weapons, Amos and his raiders were racing by them. Arutha rode straight for the hill where Murmandamus's commanders were in conference, three Armengarian archers at his side. He didn't know what drove him, but suddenly he was filled with a need to meet this dark lord. A squad of riders, those closest to the raiders, galloped to intercept the Armengarians with Arutha. Arutha found himself facing a human renegade, who grinned as he slashed at Arutha. Arutha killed him quickly and efficiently. Then the fight was fully joined. Arutha looked toward the 'command pavilion and saw

murmandamus standing in plain view, his snake companion at his side. The moredhel leader seemed indifferent to the carnage being visited upon his forces. k

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moredhel horsemen. One archer pulled up his mount and coolly sent bow shafts at the pavilion. Having learned the lesson of Murmandamus's invulnerability, he chose other targets. He was quickly joined by another bowman and suddenly two of Murmandamus's chieftains were down, one clearly dead from an arrow in the eye. Another company of foot soldiers ran toward the spot where Arutha laid about with his sword, cutting down goblins, trolls, and moredhel, attempting to protect the archers while they attacked the chieftains. For some endless time the ringing of steel and the pounding of blood in his ears were all Arutha heard. Then Amos shouted, "Begin the withdrawal!" The cry was taken up by other horsemen until every raider had heard the call.

Arutha cast a glance past where Amos sat his horse and saw another company of riders was headed toward them. Arutha slashed out with his sword, unseating another renegade, and headed toward Trask. The newly arriving renegades struck Amos's raiders, halting their movement. Then the raiders wheeled as a body and attacked Murmandamus's cavalry. Slowly the raiders began to fight their way out of the camp, killing everyone who stood between them and escape. A break appeared in the mass around them, a clear path back to the gates. Arutha spurred his mount forward and joined with the others in headlong flight back to the city. He glanced over his shoulder. A company of black-clad riders sped past Murmandamus's pavilion, following in hot pursuit. To Amos he shouted, "Black Slayers!"

Amos signalled and several riders peeled off to turn and engage the Black Slayers. They charged and met with a ringing clash of steel, and several riders from both groups were unhorsed. Then the melee dissolved as the Armengarians disengaged, while another company of Moredhel advanced upon the conflict. Most of the Armengarians who fell regained their saddles, but not all. A full dozen soldiers lay upon the sandy soil of the plane.

The gates were open when Amos's company reached the wall, and they spun in place once inside the barbican. ~, the rear guard was hurrying, engaged in a running fight with the Black Slayers and other moredhel. A dozen Armengarians sought to escape from more than thiAYmoPsurssautenresxt to Arutha as the Black Slayers cut down a pair of riders. 'Ten,' said Amos, counting the remaining riders. As they rode for the gate, Amos said, 'Nine, eight,' then, 'seven.' Upon the dusty plain a wave of black-armoured riders overwhelmed a half-dozen fleeing soldiers and Amos said, "Six, five, four." Then with a note of anger in his voice, he shouted, 'Close the



gates.! the gate began to swing shut, Arutha continued his

count. "Three, two.

The last two riders from the raiding party were cut down. Then from above came the sound of catapults launching. A moment later the screams of dying moredhel and horses filled the air. As the inner gates opened, Amos spurred his horse forward and said, 'At least the bastards paid. I saw at least four chieftains down, two clearly dead.' Amos glanced back, as if he could see through the massive gates. "But why didn't the bastard use magic? That's what I don't fathom. He could have had us, you know?" Arutha could only nod. He also wondered. He gave

his horse to a boy detailed to care for the mounts and hurried up the stairs to Guy's command location. 'Damn me!' greeted him as he joined the Protector. Several prostrate figures in black armour were rising, in jerky awkward motion, moving back toward their own lines. Quickly their movement smoothed out and they were soon running as fast as if they had been uninjured. .When you told me of those. . 'began Guy.

"you couldn't believe,' finished Arutha. '

You have to see it to understand.'

'How do you kill them?'

'Fire, magic, or by cutting their hearts out. Otherwise, even the pieces find a way to rejoin and they grow stronger by the minute. They are impossible to stop by other means.'

Guy looked out at the retreating Black Slayers. "I never had your father's fascination for things magic, Arutha, but now I'd give half my duchy - my former duchy - for a single talented magician.' Arutha considered. "Something here has me concerned. I know little of these things, but it seems that, for all his powers, Murmandamus does little to truly trouble us. I remember Pug - a magician I know - telling me of some things he has done . well, they far outstripped what we've seen so far. I think Pug could pull the gates from the city walls if he'd a mind to do so.' "I don't understand such things,' admitted Guy.

Amos was standing behind them, having approached at the last. 'Maybe the king of pigs doesn't want his army relying too heavily upon him. ' Guy and Arutha both regarded Amos with open curiosity. 'it might be a matter of ' morale. '

Guy shook his head. "Somehow I think it more complicated. '

Arutha watched the confusion in the enemy camp. whatever it is, we'll most likely know soon.'

Amos leaned on the wall. "it's been two weeks since your brother and the others left. If all has gone as

planned, Martin's at Stone Mountain today.'

Arutha nodded, "If all has gone as planned.'

Martin crouched down in the depression, his back tight against wet granite. The scraping sound of boots on the rocks above told him his pursuers were looking for signs of him. He held his bow before him, regarding the string. He had another in his pack, but no time to use it. If discovered, he would drop the weapon and draw his sword.

Martin breathed slowly, attempting to stay calm. He wondered if fate had been kind to Baru and Laurie. Two days before, they had reached what appeared to be the Yabon Hills proper. They had seen no sign of pursuit until today, when, a little after sunrise, they had been overtaken by a patrol of Murmandamus's riders. They had avoided being run down by climbing up into the rocks alongside the trail, but the moredhel had dismounted and followed. By poor chance, Martin and the others were on opposite sides of the trail and Laurie and Baru were forced southward, while Martin ran to the west. He hoped they had enough sense to continue south toward Yabon, and not to attempt to rejoin him. The chase had lasted throughout the day. Martin glanced upward, noting the sun moving behind the mountains. He judged only two more hours of light left. If he could avoid capture until dark, he would be safe.

The sound of boots grew faint and Martin moved. He left the shelter of the rock overhead and scampered along at a half-crouch, half-run, following a rill upward. He judged he was close to Stone Mountain, though he had never come there from the northeast before. But some of the landmarks looked vaguely familiar, and had he not had other concerns to occupy his attentions at this time, he was sure he could easily find the dwarves.

Martin rounded a curve and suddenly a moredhel warrior loomed up before him. Without hesitation Martin lashed out with his 'bow, striking the dark elf in the head with the heavy yew weapon. The surprised moredhel staggered, and before he could recover, Martin had his sword in hand and the moredhel lay dead. Martin spun about, seeking signs of the moredhel's companions. In the distance he thought he saw movement but couldn't be sure. He quickly hurried upward then discovered another bend. Peering around the bend, Martin found a half-dozen horses tied. He had somehow

managed to double behind the pursuers and stumble across their mounts. Martin ran forward and gained the saddle of one of the horses. He used his sword to cut the reins of the others and slapped them across the flanks with the flat of his blade to drive them off.

He spun his horse and spurred it forward. He could race down the wash and reach the trail. Then he could outrun the moredhel to Stone Mountain.

A dark shape launched itself from atop a rock as Martin rode past, dragging him from the saddle. Martin rolled and came up in a fighter's crouch, his sword out as a moredhel did the same. The two combatants faced each other as the moredhel cried out in his harsh elver dialect to his companions. Martin attacked, but the moredhel was a skilled swordsman and kept Martin at sword's length. Martin knew if he turned to flee, he'd get a blade in the ribs for his troubles, but if he stayed, he'd soon be facing five moredhel. Martin kicked rocks and pebbles at the moredhel, but the warrior was an experienced fighter who moved sideways, avoiding dust in the eyes.

Then the sound of boots pounding over the rocks could be heard from both directions. The moredhel shouted again and was answered from Martin's left, to the south. From the right the sound of armour and boots grew louder. The moredhel's eyes flickered in that direction, and Martin launched his attack. The dark elf barely avoided the blow, getting a slight cut in the arm for his troubles. Martin pushed his slight advantage, and while the moredhel was off balance, he struck out with a risky thrust that left him open for a riposte if he 'missed. He didn't. The moredhel stiffened and collapsed as he pulled his blade free.

Martin didn't hesitate. He leaped for the rocks, reaching high ground before he was overrun from both sides. Moredhel warriors came rushing into view from the southern end of the wash, and one had his sword out to slash at Martin.

Martin kicked out unexpectedly and the warrior ducked, causing him to mistime his blow. Then, equally unexpectedly, a hand reached down and gripped Martin's tunic. a Powerful Pair of arms lifted the Duke of Crydee and

dragged him over the lip of the wash. Martin looked up to discover a grinning face, with a thick red beard regarding him. 'Sorry for the rough handling, but things are about to get nasty down there.'

The dwarf pointed past Martin, who turned to see a dozen dwarves dashing down the ravine from the north. The moredhel saw the superior number of dwarven warriors and turned to flee, but the dwarves were upon them before they moved ten yards. The fight was quickly

over.

Another dwarf joined the one at Martin's side. The

first handed Martin a waterskin. Martin stood and took a drink. He looked down at the pair of dwarves, their being barely five feet, and said, 'Thanks to you.'

"No bother. The Dark Brothers have been poking

about here of late, so we keep this area heavily patrolled

As we have guests' - he indicated some dwarves who were climbing up to join them - we have no shortage of lads willing to go out and have a bash at them. Usually the cowards run, knowing they're too close to our home, but this time they were a mite slow. Now, if you don't mind me asking, who might you be and what are you doing at Stone Mountain?'

Martin said, 'This is Stone Mountain?'

The dwarf pointed behind Martin and the Duke spun about. Behind him, above the edge of the wash he had crouched in, a stand of trees reared up. Following the woods, he saw they blanketed the sides of a great peak that rose high into the clouds. He had been so intent on the pursuit of the last day, so intent on hiding, that he had seen only the rocks and the gullies. Now he recognized the peak. He was standing within a half day's walk of Stone Mountain.

Martin regarded the assembling dwarves. He removed his right glove and displayed his signet. 'I am Martin, Duke of Crydee. I need to speak with Dolgan.'

The dwarves looked sceptical, as if it was improbable for a lord of the Kingdom to come in this fashion to their halls, but they simply looked to their leader. "I'm Paxton. My father is Harthorn, Warleader of the Stone Mountain clans, and Chieftain of village Delmorja. Come along, Lord Martin, we'll take you to see the King.'

Martin laughed. 'So he did take the crown.'

Paxton grinned. 'in a manner of speaking. He said he'd take the job of King, after we nagged at him a couple of years, but he won't wear a crown. So it sits in a chest in the long hall. Come along, Your Grace. We can be there by nightfall.'

The dwarves set off, and Martin fell in beside them.

He felt safe for the first time in weeks, but now his mind returned to thoughts of his brother and the others at Armengar. How long could they hold? he wondered.

The camp reverberated with a cacophony of drums, trumpets and shouts. From every quarter came the response to the order to marshal. Guy watched the display as the false dawn gave way to the light of morning. He said to Arutha, 'Before the globe of the sun

is at noon, they'll hit us with everything they have. mermandamus may have felt the need to hold back some troops against the invasion of Yabon, but he can't afford even another day's delay. Today they will come in strength.'

Arutha nodded as he watched every company on the plane before the city marshal for battle. He had never felt so bone tired. The killing of Murmandamus's captains had thrown the enemy camp into turmoil for two days before order had been restored.

Arutha had no idea what bargains had been struck or what promises made, but finally they had come again, three days later.

For a week after, the assaults had continued, and each

time more attackers had gained the walls. The last assault of the day before had required the entire force of reserves being thrown into a potential breach to keep the integrity of the wall intact. Another few minutes, and the attackers would have had a position upon the walls to hold, so that more warriors could have scaled ladders in safety, unleashing a potential fatal flood of invaders into the city. Arutha thought, it has been twenty-seven days since Martin had left. Even if help was coming, it would be too late.

Jimmy and Locklear waited close by, ready for messenger duty. Jimmy regarded his young friend. Since Bronwynn's death Locklear had become possessed. He sought out the fighting at every turn, often ignoring instructions to stay behind for courier duty. Three times Jimmy had seen the boy involve himself in combat where he should have avoided it. His skills with the sword and his speed had counted for much, and he had survived, but Jimmy wasn't sure how long Locklear could keep surviving, or even if he really wished to. He had tried to speak to Locklear about the girl, but the younger squire had refused. Jimmy had seen too much death and destruction by the time he had reached sixteen. He had grown callous in many ways. Even when he thought Anita or Arutha dead, he had not withdrawn the way Locklear had. Jimmy wished he understood more of such things, and worried for his friend.

Guy gauged the strength of the army before him and at last, in a quiet voice, said, 'We can't hold them at the wall.'

Arutha said, 'I thought as much.' In the four weeks since Martin's departure, the city had held, the soldiers of Armengar performing beyond even Arutha's most optimistic assessment. They had given all they had, but attrition was at last sapping the army's reserve. Another thousand soldiers had been killed or rendered unable to fight in the last week. Now the defenders were spread out

too thinly to deal with the full force of the attackers, and it was clear from the careful way Murmandamus was staging that he indeed planned to throw the full strength of his army at them today in one final, all-out assault. Guy nodded to Amos. The seaman said to Jimmy, "Carry word to the company commanders: begin the third stage of evacuation now."

Jimmy nudged Locklear, who seemed almost in a trance, and led his friend off. They ran along the wall, seeking out the company commanders. Arutha watched as a few chosen soldiers left the wall once word was passed. They hurried down the steps to the bailey and began to sprint toward the citadel.

Arutha said, "What mix did you decide upon?"

Guy said, "One able-bodied fighter, two armed old men or women, three older children, also armed, and five little ones." Arutha knew that within minutes dozens of such groups would begin slipping out into the mountains through the long tunnel from the cavern beneath the city. They were to work southward, seeking refuge in Yabon. It was hoped that this way at least some of the children of Armengar might survive. The single

! "soldier would be in command of the party and each would carry orders to protect the children. And the soldiers also had orders to kill them rather than let them be captured by the moredhel.

Slowly the sun rose, moving at a steady pace, unconcerned with the conflict below. When it reached the noon position, still no signal was forthcoming. Guy %cered aloud, "Why do they wait?"

nearly a full two hours later, a faint thudding sound carried over the quiet army on the Plain, to be barely heard by the defenders. It continued for almost a full half

hour, then trumpets sounded along the line of attackers. Then from behind the lines odd figures loomed up against the bright blue sky. They appeared giant black spiders, or something akin. They began moving through the host, slowly, stately. Finally, they cleared the line of attackers, and approached the city. As they came closer, Arutha studied them. Questioning shouts came from along the wall, and Guy said, "Gods, what are they?" "Some manner of engine," replied Arutha. "Moving

siege towers.' They appeared to be gigantic boxes, three or four times the size of the ones raised against the wall the previous week. They rolled on huge wheels, without any apparent motive source, for no giant, slave, or beast of burden pulled or pushed them. They moved under their own power, by some magic means. Their immense

wheels thudded loudly when rolling over irregularities in the terrain. 'Catapults!' shouted Guy, and his hand dropped.

Stones hurled overhead, and crashed against the boxes. One was struck in a support, which shattered, causing the thing to teeter, and fall, striking the earth with a resounding crash. At least a hundred dead goblins, moredhel, and humans were thrown clear of the tower.

Arutha said, "Each one of those things must hold two, three hundred soldiers.' .

Guy counted quickly. "There are nineteen more coming. If one in three gains the walls, that's fifteen hundred attackers on the wall at once. Oil and fire arrows!' he shouted.

The defenders sought to ignite the approaching boxes as they lumbered toward the wall, but something had been applied to the wood, and while the oil burned upon a few of the things, it only scorched and blackened the wood. Screams from within told of some damage done to the attackers by the flames, but the boxes were not halted.

'All reserves to the wall. archers to the roofs beyond the bailey! Horse companies to their stations!'

Guy's orders were quickly carried out as the defenders awaited the approaching boxes. The magic siege towers filled the morning air with a loud grinding sound as the heavy wheels turned ponderously. The host of Murmandamous's army walked slowly behind the moving towers, keeping a discreet distance, for all defensive fire was directed at the rolling boxes.

Then the first of the boxes reached the wall. The side of the box facing the wall fell forward, as had happened with the smaller ones, and dozens of goblins and moredhel came leaping forward to engage the defenders.

Soon there was frenzied combat along every foot of the wall. The attackers came flooding across the plain, behind their magic siege towers. The rear of the box opened as well, with long rope ladders being tossed out, and attackers in the field behind ran forward to clamber up the suddenly accessible entrances to the city. Long leather aprons were lowered from the centre of the boxes, only a foot in front of the ladders, confounding the bow fire directed at those climbing into the boxes.

The catapult commanders continued to fire, and many of Murmandamus's soldiers died beneath the rocks, but with the archers ordered to the first row of houses and ' the other defenders engaged with the attackers' from the towers there was no bow fire to harass the host below as they raised scaling ladders against the walls.

Arutha engaged a moredhel who had leaped over the body of a fallen Armengarian soldier, and slashed out,

causing the dark elf to stumble backward. The moredhel flU off the parapet to the stones below.

" The Prince spun about and saw Guy kill another. The Protector looked about and shouted, 'We can't hold them here. pass the word to fall back to the citadel!'

Word was passed and suddenly defenders were scrambling away from those gaining the wall from outside. A select company of soldiers held each stairway while their companions fled toward the city. They were all volunteers and all were prepared to die. Arutha ran across the bailey and saw the last of the

defenders on the wall overwhelmed. As he reached the midway point across the large open area, attackers leaped from the stairs and headed for the gate. Suddenly a rain of arrows came from the roofs of the buildings opposite the gate and to the last the attackers died. Then Guy was at Arutha's side, with Amos running past.

'We can hold them off the gatehouse until they' establish their own bowmen on the wall. Then our men will have to pull back.' Arutha looked up and saw that planks were being extended across the streets from the roofs of the buildings facing the bailey. When the archer's quit the first line of buildings, they would pull the planks after them. The goblin host would have to use rams to break in doors, climb the stairs, and then engage the bowmen in a duel. By then the bowmen would hav retreated to another line of houses. They would' constantly fire down into the streets, forcing the invaders to pay for every foot gained. Over the last month, hundreds of quivers of arrows had been left under oilcloth upon those rooftops, along with replacement strings and additional bows. By Arutha's best judgment. it would cost Murmandamus no fewer than an additional two thousand casualties to travel from the first bailey to the second. Running toward the bailey came a squad of men with

large wooden mallets. They waited before heavy barrels placed at the corners, listening for the command. For a moment it appeared they would be overwhelmed, for a sea of goblins and their allies came swarming off the walls. Then a company of horsemen swept out of a side street, rolling back the invaders.

Arrows came flying past Guy and Arutha, and the Protector said, 'Their archers are in place. Sound retreat!'

A trumpet blast sounded from the squad of bowmen who were positioned halfway up the street, and the men with mallets struck the barrels, knocking small stoppers from bungs. Quickly the smell of oil mixed with the rusty odour of blood hanging in the air as the oil began slowly to leak out. The mallet-wielding soldiers at once began to



race up the streets, where barrels waited at every corner. Guy tugged at Arutha's sleeve. to the citadel. We begin the next phase.'

Arutha followed after Guy as the bloody house to house fighting began.

For two hours the terrible struggle continued, while Guy and Arutha watched from the first command post atop the wall of the citadel. In the city the shouts of fighting men could be heard, and the curses and screams continued unabated. At every turn in the city a company of archers waited, so that each block gained by the invaders was over the bodies of their comrades. Murmandamus would take the outer city, but he would pay a terrible price for it. Arutha revised his estimate of Murmandamus's~ casualties upward to three or four thousand soldiers to reach the inner bailey and the moat about the citadel. And he would still have to deal with the inner fortifications of Armengar.

Arutha watched in fascination. It was beginning to become difficult to see clearly, as the sun had fallen behind the mountains and the city was in shadow. Night was only an hour or so away, still; he could make out most of what occurred. The unarmoured, nimble archers were moving from rooftop to rooftop, , by means of long planks which they pulled after themselves. A few goblins attempted to climb the outside of buildings but were shot down by bow fire from other buildings. Guy studied the continuing battle with a keen eye. Arutha said, "This city was built for this sort of battle.'

Guy nodded. 'Had I to design one to bleed an opposing army, I couldn't have done better.' He looked hard at Arutha. "Armengar will fall, unless aid arrives within the next few hours. We have until tomorrow morning at the longest. But we'll cut the bastard, we'll hurt him badly. When he marches against Tyr-Sog, he'll have lost a third of his army.'

Arutha said, "A third? I would have said a tenth.'

With a grin devoid of humour, Guy said, 'Watch and you'll see.'

The Protector of Armengar shouted to a signal man, 'How much longer?' The man waved a white and blue cloth toward the top of the citadel. Arutha looked up and saw an answering wave with a pair of yellow cloths. The soldier said, 'No more than ten minutes, Protector.'

Guy thought, then said, "Launch another catapult strike at the outer bailey.' Orders were given and a shower of heavy stones was launched at the far end of the city. Softly, almost to himself, he said, "Let them think we've overextended our range, and maybe they'll hurry to get inside.' Time Passed slowly, and Arutha watched as the

archers retreated from roof to roof. As day faded to twilight, a company of ambushers was dashing along the street, heading for the drawbridge and outer gate of the citadel's barbican. As the first company made for the lowered bridge, another, then a third company came into view. Guy watched as the gate commander ordered it

retracted. The last soldier had just set foot upon it as it began to move across the moat. From the rooftops of the city more Armengarian archers fired down upon the invaders.

Arutha said, "They are brave, to stay behind."

Guy said, "Brave, yes, but they're not planning to die.

Even as he spoke the archers on the rooftops were reaching the last line of houses. They lowered ropes to the street level and quickly slid down. They ran toward the citadel, tossing aside weapons as they ran. From behind, attackers swarmed after them. As the attackers were halfway across the open area used as a market, bowmen upon the wall of the citadel launched a flight of arrows. The Armengarians who were fleeing ran to the edge of the moat and dove in.

Arutha said, 'They'll be shot down if they try to climb the wall.' Then he saw they didn't surface.

Guy smiled. 'There are underwater tunnels into the gatehouse and other rooms contained in the wall. Our boys and girls will come up, then the entrances will be sealed.' A particular bold group of goblins came running after and leaped into the water. 'Even if those scum find the tunnels, they'll not be able to open the trapdoors. They'd better be part fish.'

Amos came from within the citadel. "We've everything ready.,'

"Good,' answered Guy, regarding the top of the citadel where Armand observed the fighting in the city.

A yellow banner was waved. "Ready catapults!" shouted Guy. For a long time nothing happened, at last Guy said, 'What is de Seigny waiting for?'

Amos laughed. "He's watching Murmandamus leading his army through the gates, if we're lucky, or at least "waiting for another thousand or so to come inside.'

Arutha was studying the nearest catapult, a giant mangonel, now loaded with a strange-looking assortment of barrels lashed loosely together. The barrels were similar to the small brandy casks used in inns and alehouses, holding no more than a gallon. Each bundle was composed of twenty or thirty such casks.

Amos said, "The signal.' Arutha watched as a red banner was waved and Guy

shouted, 'Catapults! Fire!' along the wall a dozen of the giant catapults heaved their cargo of barrels which arched high over the roofs of the city. As they travelled, the casks spread out, so that they struck the outer bailey in a shower of wood. The crew reloaded with a speed Arutha found astonishing for in less than a minute another launch was ordered and another flight of casks was sent. While a third flight of casks was prepared, Arutha noticed smoke coming from one quarter of the city. Amos saw it, too, and said, "The little darlings are

doing some of our work for us. They must have started a tidy fire to punish us for not staying around to die. It must be something of a shock to be standing next to it when it starts raining naphtha.'

Arutha understood. As he watched, the smoke increased rapidly and began spreading along a line indicating that the entire outer bailey area was catching. "Those barrels at every corner?'

Amos nodded. 'Fifty gallons in each. The first block we broke the barrels, so it's all over the ground from the buildings to the wall. A lot of those murderers have been traipsing about in it and will likely find their feet and legs are covered. We have barrels in every building and one on every roof. At the time the horses were taken out of the city, during the second phase of evacuation, we also halted controlling the flow of oil upward. Every basement in the city is now ready to explode. The city's going to provide a warm reception for murmandamus.'

Guy signalled and the third flight of casks was sent.

But the centre pair of catapults heaved stones wrapped in burning oil-soaked rags, which coursed across the sky in a fiery arc. Suddenly an entire area near the barbican in the outer wall exploded with bright light. A tower of flames rose upward, climbing higher and higher. Arutha watched. A moment later he heard a dull thump, followed quickly by a hot breeze. The flames kept rising and for the longest time seemed likely never to stop.

Then they began to subside, but a tower of black smoke continued to rise, flattening out in an umbrella over the city, reflecting the orange glow of the inferno below.

'The barbican is gone,' said Amos. "We stored a few hundred barrels under the gate complex, with vents to let the flame in. They go with a bang. If we were half the distance closer to the wall, our ears would be ringing.'

Shouts and curses sounded from the city, as the flames began to spread. The catapults continued to launch their explosive cargo into the flames. "Shorten the range,' Guy ordered.

Amos said, "We'll drive them toward the citadel, so our bowmen can have some target practice with those

that don't get roasted. '

' Arutha observed the intensifying light. Another explosion came, followed quickly by another series, each followed by a dull thud a moment later. Hot winds blew toward the citadel as spiralling towers of flames began to race in the outer city. Again more explosions came, and from the dazzling display, it was evident a great store of barrels had been left in strategic locations.

%,hNrduig at the ears, the dull rumbles of explosion after explosion indicated that flaming death marched rapidly through the outer bailey toward the citadel. Soon Arutha could tell the difference between a bunch of barrels and a cellar explosion simply by the sound. It was as Guy had said, a warm reception for mermandamus..

"Look," said a soldier, and Guy looked up. Two red flags were being waved, now clearly seen in the blaze from the city despite the sun's having set.

"Armand's signalling that the entire outer city is in

flames,' said Amos to Arutha. 'impassable. Even those Black Slayers will be crisped if they're caught inside.' He grinned evilly as he stroked his chin. 'I just hope the grand high bilge-sucker himself was in a hurry to enter at the head of his army.'

From the city came shouts of terror and anger and the sound of running feet. The flames were marching in a steady course toward the inner bailey, their progress marked by dull explosions every few minutes as barrels at each corner ignited. The heat could now be felt, even upon the wall of the citadel. Arutha said, 'This fire storm will suck the air right out of their lungs.'

Amos nodded. "We hope so.'

Guy looked down a minute, revealing the depth of his fatigue. "Armand designed this final plan. He's a bloody genius, maybe the best field commander I've ever had. He was to wait until it appeared as many had entered as possible. We're going to have to attempt an escape through the mountains, so we must hurt them as much as we can." Arutha saw, behind his matter-of-fact words, the defeated look of a commander whose position is about to be lost. Arutha said, "You've conducted a masterful defence. ' Guy only nodded, and both Arutha and Amos knew

he was silently saying, it, wasn't enough.

Now the first of the fleeing invaders came running toward the citadel, halting when they realized they were exposed to the view of those upon the wall. They crouched in the lee of the last building, as if waiting for some miracle to deliver them. The number of Murmandamus's

soldiers fleeing the flames increased as the fire continued its advance through the city. The catapults continued to feed the casks of naphtha to the fire, shortening their range every second launch so as to bring the flames closer and closer to the inner bailey. Now those upon the wall of the citadel could see flames exploding upon the rooftops only a half-dozen houses away from the market, then five houses, then four. Shouting moredhel, goblins, and humans, with a scattering of trolls and giants, began to fight among themselves, for as the press of those fleeing the impossible heat continued, more were being pushed into the open. Guy said to Amos, 'Order the archers to open fire.'

-Amos shouted the command, and Armengarian archers began to fire. Arutha watched in stunned amazement. 'This isn't warfare,' he said softly. 'it's slaughter.' The invaders were so crowded together at the edge of the market that any arrow that reached them 'Stuck someone. They were falling over the dead as they were continuously pushed from behind. More casks of oil were thrown and the flames continued their inexorable march toward the citadel.

-, 'Arutha held up his hand, for the light of the conflagration was now near-blinding to look at and the heat was becoming uncomfortable. He realized how devastating it must be for those creatures at the edge of the market who were standing a hundred yards closer.

-'"Then more barrels exploded, and with shrieks and cries there was a general break for the citadel. Many of those who raced across the bailey were shot down, but a number of them dove in the moat. Those wearing ~ mail sank as they vainly tried to remove the armour underwater, and even some in leather sank. But many 'cleared the surface. paddling about like dogs. . Arutha judged a full two thousand lay dead in clear %-'Off. Another four or five thousand must have perished in the city. The Armengarian bowmen were beginning to Bo much they could hardly hit the targets clearly cd against the flames.

have stumbled 'across 'any or all of them. But we '

Guy said, 'Open the pipes.' An odd ' wheezing noise was heard as oil was discharged across the water in the moat. Cries of terror filled the air as those in the water came to understand ~ '-' at last, what was occurring. As flames spread out across the , bailey from the now completely burned out city, flaming bales were pushed over the walls, to fall to the moat. The surface of the water exploded in blue-white flames, which danced across the churning surface. Quickly the shrieks diminished, until at last it was over.

Arutha and the others were forced to pull back from

the wall as waves of heat rose from the moat. When the flames burned out, he glanced down and saw black husks

floating in the moat. He felt ill and saw his feelings were reflected in Guy's expression. Amos only looked on grimly. While the city burned out of control, Guy said, 'I feel the need of a drink. Come along. We only have a few more hours.' Without words, Amos and Arutha followed the Protector of a dying city toward the inner building of the

citadel.

Guy drained his flaggon, then pointed to the map on the table. Arutha looked on beside a soot-stained Briana, who, along with the other commanders, was awaiting Guy's final orders. Jimmy and Locklear had come from their last duty station and were standing at Arutha's side. Even inside the council chamber they could feel the heat from the continuing fire as the catapults poured more naphtha into the blaze. Whatever part of Murmandamus's army that had escaped the trap was being forced to wait outside the outer wall by an inferno.

'Here,' said the Protector, indicating one of several green spots on the map, "are where the horses are hidden.' He said to Arutha, 'They were moved out of the city during the second phase of evacuation. "several have remained safe. I think they assumed we had pulled back behind our redoubts up there and felt no need to stay vigilant behind us. The secret tunnel out of the city is still secure, only one patrol of The Dark Brothers has come remotely near it, and they were observed to have walked away without investigating the area. The general order is as follows: 'Each company will quit the city in turn, from First to Twelfth, with whatever auxiliaries were assigned to that company. They are to quit the tunnel only after it is clear 'the area around is secured. I want First Company to act as a perimeter unit, until the Second begins to replace it. When the Twelfth begins to leave the tunnel, the Eleventh will move out as well. Only those soldiers designated to remain here as the rear guard will be permitted to stay. I'll have no last-minute heroics jeopardizing this evacuation. I don't want any misunderstandings. Is everyone clear upon what they are to do?' No one made any comment, so Guy said, "Good. Now make sure it is understood by everyone that once outside the city it is every man for himself. I want as many to reach Yabon as possible.' With cold anger in his voice he said, "Someday we shall rebuild Armengar.' He ~-paused, as if the words were difficult. 'Begin the final phase of evacuation.'

The commanders left the room and Arutha said, 'when do you leave?'

"Guy said, 'Last, of course.' Arutha looked at Amos, 'who nodded.

'Do you mind if I stay with you?'

guy looked surprised. "I was going to suggest you go with the Second Company. First may find surprises, the later ones may run into reinforcements called %the mountains. The last to leave stand the biggest chance of being overtaken.

Arutha said, 'I don't know if I believe I'm some sort of champion destined to destroy Murmandamus, but if I am, I think perhaps I should stay.'

Guy pondered for a moment. "Why not? You can't do more than you've done. Help is on the way or it isn't. Either way, it will come too late to save the city.'

Arutha glanced at Jimmy and Locklear. Jimmy seemed upon the verge of some quip, but Locklear simply said, 'We'll stay.' Arutha was about to say something, then saw a strange

expression on the face of the squire from Land's End. There was no longer the boyish uncertainty that had always lurked behind Locklear's ready smile. Now the eyes were older, somehow less forgiving, and, without any doubt, sadder. Arutha nodded.

They waited for some time, drinking a little ale to wash away the stench of the fire and to cool them from the heat. Occasionally a messenger would report back that another company had left the citadel. The hours dragged on, as night deepened, punctuated only by an OCCasional dull explosion as another basement was at last ignited. Arutha wondered how any could have lasted so long, but each time he thought the entire city burned out another explosion would announce the destruction still in progress. When the Seventh Company had been reported safely

away, a soldier entered the room. He was dressed in leather, but it was clear he was an auxiliary, one of the herders or farmers. His red hair was tied back, falling past his shoulders, and his face was covered by a full red beard. 'Protector! Come, see this!'

Guy and the others hurried out after the warrior to a window in the long hall, overlooking the burning city. The insane inferno had subsided, but fires still burned out of control throughout the city. It was supposed that it would be another hour before Murmandamus could send more soldiers in to make their way along the gutted streets. But now it seemed they had misjudged. Between the still burning buildings near the market, figures could be seen moving toward the citadel.

Guy quit the balcony, hurrying toward the wall. When he reached it, he could see a company of soldiers in black silhouette against the flames. They moved at slow pace, as if they were being careful to stay within a clearly defined area. While they watched, another courier

reported that the Eighth Company was beginning to move out of the citadel. The approaching figures came to the edge of the outer bailey, and Guy swore. Large companies of goblins stood within protective fields, invisible except for an occasional glint of reflected light upon the surface. Murmandamus came riding into view. Jimmy said, (What is he?)

Without any apparent difficulty, the moredhel leader rode unprotected, ignoring the still-intense heat, and the beast upon which he rode was terrifying to behold. Shaped like a horse, it was covered in red glowing scales, as if some serpent skin of steel had been heated to near melting. The creature's mane and tail were dancing flames and its eyes were glowing coals. Its breath seemed explosive steam. 'Daemonsteed,' said Amos. "it's a legend. It's a mount that only a demon may ride.'

The creature reared and Murmandamus pulled out his sword. He waved it, and before the first companies of his army a black something came into existence. 'it was an inky darkness that obliterated light. It formed a pool on the stones of the bailey, flowing like quicksilver, then it possessed movement, forming a rectangle. After a moment it was apparent to those on the citadel wall that it had become a ten-foot-wide platform of jet blackness. Then, ". it slowly rose, foot by foot, forming an ebon ramp above the moat. A piece of blackness broke away from the base of the ramp and ttowed a short distance from the rising bridge' . It stabilized into another block and began to grow. Another bridge began to form from it. After another wait, a third, then a fourth span began to form. Guy said, 'Damn! He fashions some sort of bridges to the wall.' He shouted, 'Pass word to hurry the evacuation. '

When the ebon bridges were near the midpoint of the moat, the first companies of goblins mounted them and began 'to move slowly toward the leading edge. Foot by foot the black bridges advanced toward the defenders. Guy ordered the archers to fire.

The arrows sped across the gap but were deflected away, as if hitting a wall. Whatever protected the attackers from the heat also protected them from bow fire. Lookouts atop the citadel reported that the fires in the outer city were dying and more invaders were entering Armengar.

Guy shouted, "to the wall! Rear guard to the first balcony. All other units to evacuate at once. no one is to wait!"

The now orderly evacuation would soon turn into a headlong flight. The invaders were going to breach the last defence an hour or more before Guy had thought possible. Arutha knew it possible there would be room



to-room fighting within the citadel, and he made a mental promise to himself that if it came to that he'd wait to face Murmandamus.

They dashed across the courtyard and hurried up the inner stairway to the first of the three balconies, to the sound of windows and doors being shuttered and barred. As they left the long front hallway, Arutha noticed a stack of barrels placed before the lift opening. More barrels were placed at each doorway, and everything that could burn had been left in doorways, all blocked open. Arutha knew that the last act of Guy du Bas-Tyra would be to fire the citadel in the hope that more of Murmandamus's army would be taken. For the sake of the Kingdom, Arutha hoped there was some limit on Murmandamus's ability to shield his soldiers from fire. Soldiers came running down the hall, smashing odd looking panels in the wall, covered by simple boards painted to match the white stones. Behind, black holes could be seen. The faint odour of naphtha could be detected as the breeze from the open bolt-hole pushed the pungent fumes up the vents. As they walked out upon the balcony, Amos noticed Arutha looking back. 'They run from the basement to the roof. More air to feed the flames.'

Arutha nodded and watched as Murmandamus's first wave breasted the wall to the citadel. As soon as they stepped upon the wall, the field about them vanished and they spread out, ducking for cover as the archers upon the balcony opened fire. The catapults were useless, for the range was too short, but a dozen ballistae, looking like giant crossbows, hurled huge spearlike missiles at the foemen. Guy ordered the ballista crews to quit the balcony.

Guy watched as his bowmen held the invaders at bay. Arutha knew he counted every minute, for as each passed, another dozen of his people were leaving the city.

Behind the advancing goblins, more could be heard scaling the walls. Murmandamus's soldiers overran the gatehouse, extended the bridge, and opened the gate and an army came flooding in. The fires in the city were dying, so more companies of invaders were rapidly approaching the citadel. At the last, Guy shouted, 'it's over, everyone to the tunnel!'

Each Bowman took one last shot, then all turned and fled inside. At his word, Guy waited until everyone was inside before he came in, bolting the last door behind the balcony. The shutters covered every window. A sound of pounding came from below as the invaders

struggled with the bolted doors to the courtyard. 'The lift is rigged,' shouted Amos. 'We'll have to take

the stairs." They rounded a corner into another corridor, slammed and bolted a door, then ran down a narrow flight of stairs. At the bottom they reached the huge cavern. Every one of the special lanterns had been lit, illuminating the cavern with ghostly light. Arutha's eyes smarted from the sting of fumes, stirred up by the breeze from the bolt-hole tunnel, where the last of the reserve company was entering. Guy and the others ran toward the door and had to halt, for the tunnel could accommodate only two abreast. From above came the sound of shouting and pounding on the door at the top of the stairs. Again Guy insisted on being the last to enter, and he closed the door behind, placing a huge iron bar across it. "This should take them a few minutes to get ~past.' As he

turned to flee up the tunnel, he said to Arutha, "Pray" none of those bastards brings a torch into that cavern before we clear the tunnel.'

They hurried along, closing several intervening doors, each being locked by the Protector. At last they reached the end of the tunnel, and Arutha entered a large cavern. A short way off, the yawning mouth of the cave revealed night. As Guy bolted this door a dozen bowmen of the rear guard remained ready against the possibility of the Protector's having been overtaken. Another three or four dozen soldiers were moving off, attempting to wait a minute or so before leaving, so that each group of men might not stumble upon the heels of those before. From the odd noises in the night, it was clear that a few of those fleeing had encountered units of the enemy. Arutha knew it was likely that most of those leaving the city would be spread throughout the hills by sundown tomorrow.

Guy waved the bowmen out of the cave, and soon the last of those not with the rear guard were off, and only they, Locklear, Jimmy, Arutha, and Amos stood with Guy. Guy then ordered the rear guard away, and soon only the five were in the cave. Another figure came out of the gloom, and Arutha could see it was the red headed warrior who had brought news of Murmandamus's approach through the flames. "Get away!' ordered Guy.

The soldier shrugged, seeming unconcerned with the order. "You said every man for himself, Protector, I might as well stay.'

Guy nodded. 'Your name?'

"Shigga.'

Amos said, "I've heard of you, Shigga the Spear. Won the Midsummer's games last year.' The man shrugged.

Guy said, "Did you see de Sevigny?'

Shigga pointed toward the cave entrance with his chin. he and some others left just before you came out, as

you ordered. They should be well past the highest redoubt, about a hundred yards down from here.' The sound of wood tearing came faintly through the tunnel.

Guy said, 'They have reached the last door.' He grabbed a chain that ran from under the footing below the door, saying, 'Help me with this.' They all picked up the chain and helped him pull it taut, until he could attach it to a ballista pointing away from the door. The ballista had been fastened to the rock floor of the cavern. There was no bolt set in the war engine, but as soon as the chain was attached, Arutha saw its purpose. 'You fire the ballista and collapse the tunnel behind?' 'Amos said, 'The chain runs under the supports of the wall all the way back to the cavern, connecting them. It should all come down with several hundred scum covered rats inside. But there's more.'

Guy nodded. 'Start running from the cave, and when you reach the mouth, I'm going to pull this.' A rhythmic pounding sounded on the last door; some sort of ram was being brought to bear. Arutha and the others hurried outside the cave mouth and halted to watch. Guy triggered the ballista and it seemed to hesitate, then with a jerk it snapped the chain forward only a few inches. It was enough. Abruptly the door erupted outward as Guy sprinted for the cavern mouth, a rolling cloud of dust behind. A few bloodied and pulped goblin bodies fell out as rocks came rushing out of the tunnel. They all ran with Guy away from the cavern. He

pointed up, where a path led above the cave. 'I want to go up there and watch. If you want to head out now, go, but I'm going to see this.'

Amos said, 'I wouldn't miss it,' and followed after.

Arutha looked at them, then followed.

While they were climbing above the cave mouth, a rumbling beneath their feet could be felt as a series of dull explosions sounded. Amos said, 'The lifts were built to fall when the tunnel was collapsed. They should have ignited the barrels on each Boor of the citadel, all the way down to the cavern.' ~Another series of explosions could be heard. 'Seems the damn contraption worked.' '%Suddenly the ground heaved. A sound like the hedvi~il~ opening rang in their ears as they were slammed to the earth, and a concussion of enormous power stunned them all for a moment. From beyond the edge of the prominence they were climbing, an astonishing, roiling

ball of orange and yellow flames rushed heavenward. It rose at rapid rate,' expanding as it went, and in the terrible beauty of its glow they could see trailing debris being lifted upward. Dull thuds rang through the ground beneath them as the last reservoirs of naphtha began to ignite, ripping the keep apart. Stones, charred fragments of wood, and bodies were being sucked skyward as if some giant wind blew straight up.

Arutha lay upon the ground, staggered by the display.

A shrieking wind passed him, then there came an immense blast of heat. For a moment the air burned their noses and stung their faces, as if they stood within feet of the mouth of a giant furnace. Amos had to yell over the noise. 'The storage below the citadel blew. We were venting it all day and night, so it would become explosive.'

His words were faint, as ears rang, then were drowned out by another titanic explosion as the ground bucked and heaved under them, followed instantly by a series of lesser detonations, the concussion of the reports hammering at them like physical blows. They were still two hundred yards from the cliff overlooking the city, but the heat was nearly unbearable where they lay.

Guy shook his head to clear it and said, 'it's . . . so much more than we had thought.'

"Locklear said, 'if we had reached the edge of the cliff we'd have been cooked.'

Jimmy cast a glance backward. "it's a good thing we got out of the cave, as well.'

" " They all craned their heads around to look back to 'where he pointed. The ground continued to heave and more explosions sounded as rocks and debris rolled down the slopes past them. Below, the hillside had changed. the entire contents of the tunnel had been blown clear by the first massive explosion, covering the hillside %ite the cavern with a litter of body parts and debris. Then the ground heaved and pitched as another we explosion sounded. Again a fireball rose high overhead, though not as massive as the last. there was a surging, rolling motion of the ground and a third tremendous explosion came, then some minor

trembling. They all lay still, lest they be tossed down again by the shaking earth. After a time the ground only echoed with dull thuds, and they stood. Still two hundred yards or more from the edge of the cliff, they gathered and watched as the utter destruction of Armengar was accomplished. In only a few terrible moments the home of a people, the centre of their culture, had been swept away. It was an obliteration unmatched in the annals of

Midkemian warfare. Guy watched the angry, glowing sky. He attempted to walk closer to the edge of the cliff, but the heat, an almost visible curtain of superheated air rising before the cliff face, forced him back. For a moment he stood, as if resolving to brave the inferno and glimpse the remains of his city, then he relented.

'Nothing could have survived that explosion,' said Arutha. 'Every goblin and Dark Brother between the citadel and the city wall must have been killed.'

Amos said, 'Maybe his bastardness got caught with his pants down. I'd love to think he had a limit on how much his magic could handle.'

Arutha said, 'His soldiers may have died, but I think he will somehow escape. I don't think that beast he rode minded the fire.' Jimmy said, 'Look!' and pointed skyward.

The cloud of smoke that hung above them was glowing red from the reflected light of the fire below as a giant column of flames still rose toward the heavens. Against that angry backdrop a single figure could be seen riding in the air upon the back of a glowing red steed. It seemed to be descending, as if running downhill in a circle, and it was clearly making its way back to the heart of Murmandamus's camp. "Son of a mangy bitch!" swore Amos. 'Can't anything

kill that dungeater?' Guy looked about. 'I don't know, but now we have other worries.' He began to climb down, and they discovered that the entire cavern had collapsed beneath them. Where the cave mouth had been, only a mass of rubble extending out into the gully could be seen. They picked their way through the debris, passing beyond several collapsed stone redoubts that had protected the city from attack from above, and at last reached the wash heading down into a canyon where horses were hidden. Guy said, 'The first four or five canyons will have been picked clean by those first to flee. If we're to find mounts, we must look farther out.'

Arutha nodded. "Still, we have a choice: west toward Yabon, or east toward Highcastle."

'Toward Yabon,' answered Guy. "if help's coming, we have a chance of meeting it along the road." He scanned the area, looking for some sign of which was the most likely direction to travel. 'Whatever units Murmandamus had up here will likely be disorganized now. We may yet get free of them.'

. Amos chuckled., "Even his larger companies will be reluctant to stand in the way of a rout army. It isn't sadly healthy."

Guy said, "Still, if they find themselves cornered, they'll fight like the rats they are. And at first light their'll be thousands of reinforcements up here. We have

only a few hours at best to get away.'

The sound of movement from the canyon caused all to grab weapons and move back into what little shelter was afforded by the fallen rocks. Guy signalled for everyone to be ready.

they waited silently, and from around the corner a figure emerged. Guy sprang forward, halting his blow in air.

'briana!'

commander of the Third Company looked slightly  
%, , blood flowing from a cut upon her temple. Seeing  
Guy she relaxed. 'Protector, she said with relief. "We  
were forced to turn back. There was a patrol of trolls at  
the lower end of the canyon who were attempting to flee  
back to their own lines. We seemed to be fighting to get  
past each other. Then the explosion.

we were showered with rocks. I don't know what happened to the  
trolls. I think they fled. . .' She pointed to her bleeding  
forehead. "Some of us were hurt.'

'Who is with you?' he asked.

Arutha stepped forward as Briana shook her head to  
clear it, then motioned, and into the glow from the  
conflagration in the city came two more guards, one  
obviously wounded, and a dozen or more children. With  
wide, startled eyes they regarded Arutha, Guy, and the  
others. briana said, "They had been trapped in a draw by

some Dark Brothers. Some of my soldiers killed the  
Brothers, but we were separated. We've been finding  
stragglers for the last hour.'

Guy counted. 'Sixteen.' He turned to Arutha. 'What  
do we do now?'

Arutha said, 'Every man for himself or not, we can't  
%leTmtohsem turned, alerted by some approaching sound.  
.Whatever we do, we'd best do it somewhere else. Come  
along." guy pointed over the rim of the draw and he and the

others began helping the children climb. Soon they were  
all above the canyon rim and moving off toward the  
west. Arutha was the last to reach the rim, and as the others

vanished out of sight he dropped to his knees behind an

outcropping of rock. Into view came a company  
of goblins, moving cautiously as if expecting attack at every  
turn while they attempted to return safely from their  
lines. From their bloodied appearance, it was clear they  
had already encountered some elements of the Armengarian  
rout. Arutha waited until he was sure the children  
were safely along, then took a rock and heaved it as far  
past the goblins as possible. The stone sped unobserved

through the dark and clattered behind them. The goblins spun around and hurried along, as if fearing attack from behind. Arutha ducked along the ridge, running in a crouch, then jumped down to the next trail. Soon he overtook the last of their party, the man called Shigga, acting as rear guard.

Shigga motioned with his head. Arutha whispered, 'Goblins.'

The spearman nodded and they moved down the trail following the band of tiny fugitives.

15

Flight

Arutha motioned for a halt.

Everyone, including the children, moved against the rocks, hiding from possible observation. The entire party crouched down in a gully, one they had been following for most of the night. Dawn was approaching, and after the fiery destruction of Armengar, the hills behind the city had become a no-man's land.

the fall of the city had been a victory for Murmandamus but a vastly more costly one than he had expected.

The hills behind Armengar had been thrown into chaos. units already in place there had been overrun by the army fleeing the city. A large number of goblins and moredhel had quit the hills and fled back toward Murmandamus's camp.

for the first few hours after the fall of the city, Arutha's party had seen few goblins or Dark Brothers, but it was obvious that Murmandamus had ordered a large number of his units back into the hills. At first Murmandamus's forces had no clear advantage once in the rocks. There was no coordination among commanders and not enough soldiers had come into the hills to put the fleeing Armengarians at a clear numerical disadvantage. Bands of goblins and moredhel ventured into the gullies and washes behind the city in the darkness, seeking to overtake the fugitives, but many never returned. Now, the balance was shifting; soon the area would be entirely in the enemy's control.

Arutha glanced back at the huddling children. Several of the little ones were close to exhaustion from a sleepless night and constant terror. The problem of finding a safe passage south was confounded by the inability of the youngest children to move quickly. And at each turn they ran the chance of encountering the enemy. Twice they had blundered into elements from the city, and Guy had ordered them along on their own, refusing to let this group become larger. Twice more they had discovered corpses, from both sides.

The sound of boots grew louder, and from the number and the lack of any attempt to hide their approach, Arutha judged this likely to be the enemy. He signalled and everyone faded back along the gully, until Arutha, Guy, Amos, Briana, and Shigga crouched down in the shadows before the huddling children. Jimmy and Locklear stayed in the midst of the children, keeping them quiet. The patrol, led by a moredhel, consisted of trolls and

goblins. The trolls were sniffing the air, but the heavy reek of smoke confounded their senses. They marched past the gully and down a large defile. When they were past, Arutha motioned and the company moved cautiously forward, travelling toward the west, away

Suddenly a child yelled in fright, and Arutha and the others whirled around. Jimmy was leaping past the

children, Locklear at his side, weapons drawn as the trolls attacked. Whether they had discovered the fugitives or had simply decided to double back along the defile, Arutha did not know, but he knew they must dispose of this patrol quickly or they would alert others. Arutha lunged over Locklear's shoulder and killed a troll forcing the boy back. Amos and Guy passed them and soon the entire company was engaged. Shigga thrust with his spear, killing another troll, while the moredhel faced Guy. The dark elf recognized the Protector of Armengar, for he shouted, "one-eye!" he attacked with savage fury, pushing Guy backward, but Locklear duplicated Arutha's trick, striking past Guy, killing the moredhel.

Abruptly it was over, with five trolls, an equal number of goblins, and the moredhel dead. Arutha was breathing heavily when he said, 'it's a good thing this is a narrow gully. If they'd got around us, we'd never have survived.'

Guy regarded the greying sky and said, 'We have to find some place to hide. The children are ready to drop, and there's no place close where we can move over the mountains.'

Shigga said, 'My kraal is not far, so I've travelled here, protector. There's a trail a mile more to the west, not often used. It leads to a shallow cave. Perhaps we can reach it. It's a difficult climb. . .'

'But we've no choice,' said Amos.

Guy said, 'Show us.'

Shigga set out at a trot, only slowing to glance around bends in the trail. When he at last climbed up on the rocks next to the defile, they began lifting the children. the last child had been handed up and Briana had



climbed up after, when a shout came from the west. A half-dozen Armengarian soldiers were fighting a rearward action as a larger number of goblins pursued them toward Arutha and his companions. 'Get the children out of here!' Guy shouted to Briana, Shigga crouched with his spear at the ready, while Briana hurried the children along toward the cave. Arutha and the others joined with the Armengarians and blocked the defile, refusing to yield to the goblins. The goblins fought with a frantic quality, and suddenly Arutha shouted, 'They're fleeing from someone behind.' The pressure increased as goblins began to leap at the

Armengarians. Guy ordered a slow withdrawal, and step by step they let the goblins push them back along the defile. Shigga crouched above the defile, guarding the slight trail to the cave from any goblin or troll who might attempt to climb toward the children, while Briana continued to usher the children upward. But the goblins chose to ignore them, seeking frantically to get past. Then a shout from the other side, beyond Arutha's vision, sounded, and several of the rearmost goblins began battling some other foe. The goblins ceased moving, as they were trapped between two groups of

Arutha ~ yarl~ from behind caused Arutha to spin about. Jimmy and Locklear had been watching the rear, and another company of goblins was appearing at the far end of the defile. Without hesitation, Arutha shouted Ceba! nGdetthoeubt! the boys leaped for the rocks, then stabbed

downward at the goblins to allow Amos and Guy a chance to climb upward. Now Arutha could see what had

caused the first band of goblins to flee back toward them. A company of dwarves was battling furiously against the goblins. Behind the dwarves, two elves could also be seen, who drew bows and fired over the heads of their shorter companions. Arutha recognized one of the elves and shouted, 'Galain!'

The elf looked up and waved. He shouldered his bow and leaped up on the ridge, skirting the fighting in the gully below. With a long running leap he cleared another wash and landed on the side of the defile where Arutha stood. 'Martin has gone on to Yabon. are you all right?' Arutha nodded as he drew a deep breath. 'Yes, but the city's gone.'

The elf said, 'We know. Even miles away the explosion was seen. We've been encountering refugees all night.. Most of the dwarves under Dolgan have formed a rough corridor along the high trail.' He pointed back

at the main trail they had used in coming to Armengar. "Most of those fleeing will get through." Guy said, "There are children in that cave up there. He waved to where Shigga crouched on the other side of the defile.

Galain called out, 'Arian! There are children up there.' He pointed toward the cave. The second detachment of goblins joined the fray and further conversation was halted. Several goblins attempted to climb up after in the rocks, but Amos kicked one in the face and ran another through, and the others thought better of it. A momentary pause in the fight allowed Arian, the

other elf, to yell, "We'll get them out." The elf continued at the goblins while two dwarves scrambled up the trail, to aid Shigga, Briana, and the two Armengarian soldiers in getting the children

'Calin sent a company of us to Stone Mountain to honour Dolgan's accepting the crown. when Martin arrived and told of what was going on up here, Dolgan set off at once. Arian and I decided to come along while the rest returned to Elvandar with word of Murmandamus's march. Calin can't leave our forests unprotected with Tomas gone, but I suspect he'll send a company of archers to help the dwarves get the survivors over the mountain. The dwarves' corridor is well held, from the Inclindel Gap to about a mile west of here. Dolgan's warriors are all through the hills, so it'll be lively up here for a while.'

The dwarves fought a holding action from behind a shield wall while those above handed the children down to two dwarves at the rear, who quickly led them to safety. Jimmy tugged at Guy's sleeve and pointed to where a company of trolls was climbing up from below. Guy glanced about, seeing better than a dozen goblins still between himself and the dwarves, then pointed toward the east. He waved to Briana and Shigga, indicating they should flee with the children. Quickly Guy and the others scrambled behind the goblins, and leaped down. They ran back to the last intersection they had used, and moved down the shallow gully. Ducking into the same covering they had availed themselves of moments before, Guy said, "Those trolls coming up from below will make it impossible to reach the dwarves. Perhaps we can drop lower and move along until we've  
%cit(ladlainrosuait ste'sm pretty chaotic up here. I was with the

most forward elements of Dolgan's army and they've come as far as they can. Now they'll begin withdrawing, If we don't overtake them quickly, we'll be left behind.'

Further conversation was interrupted by shouts from above as more of Murmandamus's forces ran along the ridges toward the invading dwarves. Guy signalled and they moved off at a crouched walk, deeper into the wash, heading down. After they had gone a few hundred more yards, Guy said, "Where are we?"

They all exchanged looks and realized they had taken a different way from the one they had come, and now they were somewhere to the west of the cavern that had emptied out behind the city. Jimmy glanced up and began to rise, then ducked down again. He pointed.

'There's a glow in the sky still, over there, so that must be where the city is.'

Guy swore softly. 'We're not as far east as I thought. I don't know where this gully empties out.'

Arutha looked at the lightening sky. "We'd better keep moving.' They hurried off, not certain where they were heading, but knowing that to be caught would be to die.

'Riders,' whispered Galain, who had been scouting ahead.

Arutha and Guy both pointed, and the elf said, "Renegades. A half dozen. The louts are taking their

ease about a campfire. You'd think it was a picnic.'

'Any signs of others?' asked Guy.

"Nothing. I saw some movement farther to the west, but I think we've moved behind Murmandamus's lines. If those lazing about the fire are any indication, things are pretty calm hereabouts.'

Guy gestured with his thumb across his throat. Arutha 'nodded. Amos pulled a belt knife and motioned for the 'boys to circle the camp. In a crouch they all moved along, until Jimmy signalled and he and Locklear ' climbed up above the trail. The two squires moved quickly and silently, while Arutha, Amos, Galain, and guy waited. They heard a startled shout and dashed %s))knward.

The two squires had jumped a guard at the far end of the camp, and the five other men had their backs . Three died without knowing someone was standing behind them, and the other two quickly followed. glanced about. "Take their cloaks. If we're questioned, we'll likely be found out, but if we keep to the ridges, perhaps their sentries will think us only another band out looking for stragglers.'

The boys put cloaks of blue over their Armengarian brown leather. Arutha kept his own cloak of blue, while Amos donned one of green. Guy retained his black one. To a man the Armengarians wore brown, so the colours might disguise the fugitives for a while. Arutha tossed a

grey cloak to Galain and said, 'Here, try to look like a Dark Brother.'

Dryly the elf said, 'Arutha, you do not know what a test of friendship that remark is. I must have Martin explain such things to you.'

Arutha said, "Gladly, if it's back home over wine in the company of our families.'

The bodies were rolled down into a gully. Jimmy leaped atop the ridge above the camp and climbed up another ridge "above that, standing so that he might get some sense of where they were. 'Damn!' he swore as he jumped back down.

Arutha said, 'What?'

'A patrol, about a half-mile back along the trail. It's not in any hurry, but it's coming this way. Thirty or more riders.'

Guy said, 'We have now,' and they mounted the renegades' horses.

As they moved out, Arutha said, 'Galain, I've not had a moment to ask of the others who travelled with Martin.' He left the question unasked.

Galain said, "Martin was the only one to reach Stone Mountain. He shrugged. 'We know Laurie's boyhood friend is dead,' he said of Roald, not using the dead man's name in elver fashion. 'Of Laurie and Baru Serpentslayer, we know nothing.' Arutha could only nod. He felt regret at the death of Roald. The mercenary had proved a loyal companion. But he was more disturbed at Laurie's unknown fate, he thought of Carline. He hoped for her sake Laurie was well. He put aside that worry for more immediate concerns and motioned for Galain to lead the way.

They moved eastward, taking the higher trail whenever possible. Galain rode in the van, and they did resemble a company of renegades led by a moredhel.

At a point where two trails met, they could again see the city. It squatted against the mountain, smoking rubble. The crater where the keep had stood still spewed forth black smoke. The rocks of the cliff face seemed to glow red in the early morning gloom. "is there nothing left of the keep?' Guy asked in quiet wonder.

Amos looked down, his face a stony mask. (it was there,' he answered, pointing to a spot at the base of the cliff. Now only the raging inferno could be seen as the pool of naphtha burned unabated in the deep pit blown out of the rocks. Nothing which resembled the keep, the inner wall, moat, or the first dozen blocks of the city could be seen. Those buildings nearest the citadel still discernible were little more than piles of rubble. Only the outer wall remained intact, except where the barbican had been exploded. Everything was gutted, charred

black, or glowing red. Amos said, "it's all gone. Armengar is gone.' No building remained intact, and the entire mountainside was shrouded by a blue black haze of smoke. Even outside the walls, the litter of bodies was appalling.

It was clear that Murmandamus had taken a terrible beating in sacking the city, but still his host dominated the plain outside the walls. Banners flew and companies moved, as the moredhel warlord ordered his army to march. Amos spat. 'Look, he still has a larger army in reserve than he threw at us.'

Arutha said with fatigue in his voice, "You cost him close to fifteen thousand dead

Guy interrupted. 'And he can still march more than thirty-five thousand against Tyr-Sog. . .' Elements were moving, and the scouts and outriders were already galloping toward their assigned places along the line of march. Guy studied it for a moment, then said, 'Damn me! He's not moving south! He's moving his army eastward!'

Arutha looked at Amos, then at Guy. 'But that makes no sense. He can hold the dwarves to the west, pushing them back until he's in Yabon.'

Jimmy said, "To the east. . .'

lies Highcastle,' finished Arutha.

Guy nodded. "He's going to march his army down Cutter's Gap, right into Highcastle's garrison.'

Arutha said, 'But why? He can overrun Highcastle in days, but he'll be left standing in the middle of the High Wold, unprotected on either flank. He's got no obvious goal.' Guy said, 'if he strikes dead south, he can be in the

Dimwood inside a month.'

'Sethanon,' said Arutha.

Guy said, "I don't understand it. He can take Sethanon. Its garrison is little more than an honour company. But once there, what? He can winter, living on forage from the Dimwood and whatever city stores he captures, but come spring, Lyam can hit him from the east and your forces from the west. He'll be between the hammer and the anvil, with a five-hundred-mile retreat back into the mountains. It would mean his destruction.'

Amos spat. 'Let's not underestimate the nose-picke.'

He's up to something.' Galain looked about. "We'd best be going along. If

he's moving east for certain, we'll never be able to double back and reach Inclindel. That patrol we saw will be a company of outriders. They'll stay up here along the entire line of march, following behind us.'

Guy nodded. "Then we must reach Cutter's Gap before his advanced elements.'

Arutha spurred his horse and they began the ride eastward.

For the balance of the day they managed to keep ahead of any of Murmandamus's soldiers. Occasionally they would see flankers riding off from the main army, far below on the plain, and there were signs of movement behind them. But the trail began moving downward, and near sundown Arutha said, 'We're going to be riding smack into their outer pickets if we keep moving toward the plain.'

Guy said, 'If we continue riding past dark, we might slip into the woods at the bottom of the hills. If we hug the foot of the mountains and ride all night, we'll enter the forest proper. I doubt even Murmandamus will be sending large numbers of soldiers into the Edder Forest. He can circle it easily enough. The Edder is no place I'd like to be, but we'll have cover. If we ride all night, we might stay enough ahead of them to be safe . . . at least from them.'

Jimmy and Locklear exchanged questioning looks, then Jimmy said, 'Amos, what's he mean?'

Amos glanced at Guy, who nodded. 'The Edder's a bad place, boy. We can - could forest for about three miles or so into the woods along its edge. A little farther in a man could hunt. But farther than that, well - we don't know what's in there. Even the goblins and dark Brothers skirt the place. Whoever goes deep into the forest just doesn't come back. We don't know what's in there. The Edder's pretty damn big, so just about anything could hide in there.'

Arutha said, 'We leap from the cauldron to the fire, then '

'Perhaps,' answered Guy. 'Still, we know what we face if we ride the plain.'

Jimmy said, 'Maybe we could slip by, keeping our disguises.'

It was Galain who answered. 'There is no chance, Jimmy. One look and any moredhel knows an eledhel instantly. It is something we do not speak of, but simply believe me. There is an instinctive recognition.'

Amos spurred his mount forward. 'Then there's nothing else for it. Into the forest, lads.'

They rode as quietly as they could through woodlands dark and foreboding. Distant calls echoed from murmandamus's army, camped for the night on the plains to the north. By moving throughout the night, Arutha judged they would be well ahead of Murmandamus's army by sun-up. By midday they would be out of the

forest, back upon the plain, able to pick up speed. Then if they could reach Cutter's Gap and Brian, Lord Highcastle, there was a chance of slowing Murmandamus all the way down the High Wold and through the Dimwood. Jimmy spurred his horse forward and overtook Galain.

"I've got this funny itch.'

Softly the elf said, "I feel it, too. I also sense something familiar about these woods. I can't put a name to it '

Then with elvish humour he added, 'But then, I'm only a youngster, barely forty years of age.'

Returning the dryness, Jimmy said, 'An infant.'

Guy, who rode next to Arutha, said, 'We might just get to Highcastle.' He was quiet for a while, then at last said, 'Arutha, returning to the Kingdom poses some problems for me.' Arutha nodded in understanding, though the gesture

was lost in the dark. 'I'll speak with Lyam. I assume once at Highcastle I'll have your parole. Until we sort this mess out, you'll be under my protection.'

Guy said, 'I'm not worried over my fate. Look, I've what's left of a small nation streaming down into Yabon.

I just . . . just want to ensure they're well cared for.' His voice revealed a deep sense of despair. "I vowed to rebuild Armengar. We both know that will never be.'

Arutha said, 'We'll work out something to bring your people into the Kingdom, Guy.' He studied the form that rode slowly beside him in the darkness. "But what of yourself?'

"I have no concern for myself. But . . . look, consider interceding with Lyam on Armand's behalf . . . if he got out. He's a fine general and able leader. If I had taken the crown, he would have been the next Duke of Bas-Tyra.

With no son of my own, I couldn't imagine a better choice. You'll need his sort, Arutha, if we're to weather all that's coming. His only fault is an overblown sense of personal loyalty and honour.'

Arutha promised to consider the request and they lapsed into silence. They continued riding until well after midnight, when Arutha and Guy agreed upon a halt.

'Guy approached Galain while they rested the horses and said, "We're now farther into these woods than any Armengarian has travelled and returned.'

Galain said, "I'll keep alert.' He studied Guy's face. 'I have heard of you, Guy du Bas-Tyra. At last recounting, you were something of an object of distrust,' he said with elver understatement. "It seems the situation has changed.' He nodded toward Arutha.

Guy smiled a grim smile. "For the moment. 'Fate and circumstance occasionally forge unexpected alliances.'

The elf grinned. "That is true. You have an elf-like

appreciation. I would like to hear the tale someday.'  
Guy nodded. Amos approached and said, 'I thought I heard something that way.' Guy looked where he indicated. Then both discovered Galain gone.  
Arutha came over. 'I heard it also, as did Galain. He'll return soon. Guy hunkered down, resting while alert. 'Let's hope

he's able.'

Jimmy and Locklear tended the horses in silence. Jimmy studied his friend. In the gloom he could only see a little of the boy's expression, but he knew that Locklear still hadn't recovered from Bronwynn's death. Then Jimmy was visited by a strange sense of guilt. He hadn't thought of Krinsta since the retreat from the wall. Jimmy tried to shrug aside the irritation. Hadn't they been lovers from desire and entered freely into the relationship? Had any promises been made? Yes and no, but Jimmy felt nettled at his own lack of concern. He didn't wish any harm to Krinsta but he didn't see much sense in worrying about her. She was as able to take care of herself as any woman Jimmy had met, a soldier by training since childhood. No, what troubled Jimmy was the absence of concern. He vaguely sensed something was lacking. He became irritated. He'd had enough concern with others in his life, with Anita's injury and Arutha's mock death. Becoming involved with other people was a bloody inconvenience. Finally he felt his irritation grow to anger. He moved up to Locklear and grabbed his friend

roughly, swinging him about. 'Stop it!' he hissed. Locklear's eyes widened in surprise. 'Stop what?' 'This bloody damn - silence. Bronwynn's dead and it wasn't your fault.' Locklear's expression remained unchanged, but slowly

moisture gathered in his eyes, then tears began to run down his face. Pulling his shoulder out from under Jimmy's hand with a shrug, he quietly said, (The horses.' He moved away, his face still streaked with tears. Jimmy sighed. He didn't know what had possessed him to act that way, but suddenly he felt stupid and thoughtless. And he wondered how Krinsta was faring, if she was still alive. He turned to the horses and struggled to push away strong emotions.  
Galain returned at a silent run. 'A light of some sort, far into the woods. I ventured close, but heard movement. They were stealthy, almost passing unnoticed, but I did hear signs of their coming this way.'  
Guy moved toward his horse, as did the others. Galain mounted, and when the others were ready, he pointed. He whispered, "We must move to the edge of the forest, as far from the light as we can without being seen by



Murmandamus's scouts.'

He spurred his horse and began to ride forward. He had moved about a dozen paces when a figure dropped out of the trees from above, knocking him from the saddle.

More attackers leaped down from the trees and all the riders were dragged from their horses. Arutha hit the ground and rolled, coming to his feet with his sword in hand. He regarded his opponent, looking into an elf-like face set in a mask of hatred. Then he saw the bowmen behind, drawing a bead upon him, and with a strange sense of finality, he thought, is this how it will end at the last? The prophecy was wrong.

Then the one sitting atop Galain pulled him up by the tunic, his other hand drawn back with a knife ready to kill him. He faltered, exclaiming, '

Eledhel!' followed by a sentence in a language unknown to Arutha.

Suddenly the attackers ran forward, but no attempt was made to kill Arutha's party. Hands restrained them while Galain's attacker helped him to his feet. They spoke rapidly in the other language, and Galain motioned to Arutha, then the rest. The others, dressed in grey hooded cloaks, nodded and pointed toward the east.

Galain said, 'We must go with them.'

In soft tones Arutha said, 'Do they think us renegades and you

one of them?'

The normal elver mask was dropped and Galain revealed confusion in the gloom. "I don't know what wonder we have stumbled into, Arutha, but these aren't moredhel. They're elves.' He glanced about the clearing 'And I've never seen any of them before in my life.'

They were brought before an old elf, who sat upon a wooden seat, elevated by a platform. The clearing was seventy or so feet wide, and on all sides elves squatted or stood. The surrounding area was their home, a village of huts and small buildings of wood, but totally lacking the beauty and grace found in Elvandar. Arutha glanced about. The elves stood arrayed in unexpected garb. Grey cloaks, much like those worn by the moredhel, were common, and the warriors wore an assortment of leather armour and furs. Odd decorative jewellery of copper and brass, set with unpolished stones, or necklaces of animal teeth hung about many of the warrior's necks. The weapons were rude but efficient-looking, lacking the fine craftsmanship common to those elver weapons Arutha had seen before. That these were elves was certain, but they possessed a barbaric aspect that caused Arutha no

small discomfort. The Prince listened as the leader of those who had captured them spoke to the elf upon the seat. "Aron Earanorn," whispered Galain to Arutha. 'That

means King Redtree. They call that one their king.' The King motioned for the prisoners to be brought forward and spoke to Galain. Arutha said, 'What did he say?' The King said, 'What I said was that had your friend

not been recognized, you'd all most likely be dead now.' Arutha said, 'You speak the King's Tongue.' The old elf nodded. "As well as Armengarian. We speak the tongues of men, though we have nothing to do with men. We have learned it over the years from those we have captured.'

Guy seemed angered. "It has been you who have been killing my people!"

'And who are you?' asked the King.

'I am Guy du Bas-Tyra, Protector of Armengar.'

The King nodded. 'One-eye, we have heard of you. We kill any who invade our forest, whether men, goblins, trolls, or even our dark kin. We have only enemies without the Tauredder. But this' - he pointed at Galain - "is something new to us.' He studied the elf. "I would know you and your line.'

'I am Galain, son of one who was brother to one who ruled,' he said, not using the names of the dead in elver fashion. 'My father was descended from he who drove the moreldhel from our homes. I am cousin to Prince Calin and nephew to Queen Aglaranna.'

The old elf's eyes narrowed as he studied Galain. 'You speak of princes, yet my son was slain by the trolls seventy winters ago. You speak of queens, yet my son's mother died in the battle for Neldarlod, when our dark brothers last sought to destroy us. You speak of things I do not understand. '

Galain said, 'As do you, King Earanorn. I do not know where lies this Neldarlod you spoke of, nor have I heard of our people living north of the great mountains. I speak of those of our kin who live in our home, in Elvandar.'

Several elves said, 'Barmalindar!'

Arutha said, 'What is that word?'

Galain said, 'it means "golden home - place - land" it's a place of wonder. They think of it as a fable.'

The King said, 'Elvandar! Barmalindar! You speak of legends. Our ancient home was destroyed in the Days of the Mad Gods' Rage.'

Galain was silent for a long while, as if deeply considering something. Finally he turned to Arutha and Guy. 'I am going to ask that you be taken from here. I must speak of things, things which I lack the wisdom to

know if it is proper to share with you. I must speak of those who have gone to the Blessed Isle, and speak of the shame of our race. I hope you understand.' To the King he said, "I would speak of these things, but they are for the eldhel only to hear. Will you take my friends to a place of safety while I speak?"

The King nodded and waved for a pair of guards, who escorted the five humans to another clearing. There was no place to sit, except upon the ground, so they hunkered down upon the damp soil. They could not hear Galain speak, but they caught the faint sound of his voice on the night wind. For hours the elves held council and Arutha drifted off into a doze.

Suddenly Galain was there, motioning for them to rise. 'I have spoken of things I'd thought I had forgotten, old lore taught to me by the Spellweavers. I think they believe now, though they are deeply shaken.'

Arutha looked at the two guards who waited some distance away, respecting Galain's privacy. "Who are these elves?" Galain said, "I understand that when you and Martin

passed through Elvandar on your way to Moraelin, Tathar told you of the shame of our race, the genocidal war conducted by the moredhel against the glamredhel. I think these are the surviving descendants of the glamredhel.

They seem proper elves' and are certainly not moredhel, but they have no Spellweavers or keepers of lore. They have become more primitive, little more than savages. They have lost many arts of our people. I don't know. Perhaps those who survived the last battle, when the first Murmandamus led the moredhel, came here and found refuge. The King spoke of their having lived for a long time in Neldarlod, which means "Place of the Beech Trees", so they are but recently come to Edder Forest.' 'They've been here long enough to make it impossible for the Armengarians to hunt or lumber deeply,' said Guy. 'At least three generations.'

'I'm speaking of elver things, an elver sense of 'years,' answered Galain. "They've been here over two hundred years.' He regarded the two guards. 'And I don't think they're entirely free of the glamredhel heritage. They're much more warlike and aggressive than we of Elvandar, almost as much as the moredhel. I don't know. This King seems unsure of what should be done. He's taking counsel now with his elders, and I expect we'll hear what they wish in a day or two.'

Arutha looked alarmed. "in a day or two, Murmandamus will again be between us and Cutter's Gap. We must be away this day.'

Galain said, 'I'll return to council. Perhaps I can explain a few things to them about the way the world

works outside this forest.' He left them and they sat, again resigned to having nothing to do but wait.

Nearly half the day had passed when Galain returned. 'The King will let us go. He'll even provide escort to the valley that leads to Cutter's Gap, along a clear trail, so we will reach it before Murmandamus's army. They'll have to go around the forest, while we'll go straight through.'

Arutha said, 'I was worried we might have trouble.' 'We did. You were going to be killed, and they were still deciding what to do with me.'

'What changed their minds?' said Amos.

'Murmandamus. I just mentioned that name and you would have thought someone had stuck a branch in a hornets' nest. They have lost much lore. but that is one name they remember. There is no doubt we have found the descendants of the glamredhel here. I judge about three or four hundred in the immediate area from the number

of those in council. There are more living in distant communities, enough that it doesn't pay for anyone to bother them in any event.'

'Will they help with the fight?' asked Guy.

Galain shook his head. I don't know. Earanorn is a sly one. If he should bring his people to Elvandar they'd be welcomed but not entirely trusted. There's too much of the savage about them. It would be years before anyone was comfortable. He also knows that in the council of the true Elf Queen, he would be only a minor member, as he is not even a Spellweaver. He would be included, as a gesture to his people and also because he is among the oldest of the elves living in the Edder Forest. But, here he is a king, a poor king, but still a king. No, this will not be an easy or simple problem. But, that is the sort of question we elves are willing to spend years in ponder'ing.

I've given Earanorn clear instructions on the way to Elvandar, so that should his people wish to return to our mother forest, they may. They will come or not as pleases them, while for now we must make for Highcastle. '

Arutha rose and said, 'Good, at least we have one less

problem.' Jimmy followed Arutha toward the horses and said to

Locklear, 'As if the one's we have left are such piddly little things.' Amos laughed and clapped the boys on the shoulders.

The horses were at their limit, for Arutha and his

companions had been riding them hard for almost a week. The tired animals were footsore and slow, and Arutha knew they had only just managed to stay ahead of the invaders. The day before, they had spotted smoke behind them, as Murmandamus's advanced scouts had made camp at day's end. This lack of caution at being spotted showed their contempt for the garrison between them and the Kingdom.

Cutter's Gap was at the south end of a wide valley, running through the Teeth of the World, rock-strewn and densely grown with brush for most of its length. Then it cleared, with no vestige of cover. Only scorched ground could be seen. Jimmy and Locklear glanced about, and Guy observed, 'We have reached the limit of Highcastle's patrols. He probably has a burn here every year, to keep the area uncovered so no one can approach undetected.'

As the sixth day since their leaving the Edder Forests was drawing to a close, the valley began to narrow and they entered the gap. Arutha slowed his horse as he looked about, softly observing, 'Remember Roald saying that thirty mercenaries held back two hundred goblins here?'

Jimmy nodded, thinking of the fun-loving mercenary. They rode into the gap in silence.

'Halt and identify yourselves!' came the cry from the rocks above.

Arutha and the others reined in and waited while the speaker revealed himself. A man stepped out from behind a rock above on the rim of the gap, a man wearing a white tabard with a red stone tor depicted upon it, still clear in the twilight of evening. A company of riders appeared from down the narrow canyon while bowmen rose up on all sides above.

Arutha slowly raised his hands. 'I am Arutha, Prince of Krondor.'

There were several laughs and the officer in charge said, 'And I'm your brother, the King. Nice and bold, renegade, but the Prince of Krondor' lies dead in his family's vault in Rillanon. If you'd not been running weapons to the goblins you'd have heard.'

Arutha shouted back, 'Get me to Brian Highcastle.'

The leader of the horsemen rode up next to the Prince and said, 'Put your hands behind you, there's a good lad.' Arutha removed his right gauntlet, and held out his

signet. The man studied it, then shouted, 'Captain, Have you seen the Royal Seal of Krondor?'

'An eagle flying over a mountain peak.'

"Well, whether he's the Prince or not, he's wearing the

ring.' Then the man looked at the others. "And he's got an elf with him, too.'

'An elf? You mean a Dark Brother.'

The soldier looked confused. 'You'd better come down here, sir.' He said to Arutha, "We'll get this straight in a minute . . . Your Highness,' he added in a soft voice, just in case. The captain took several minutes to reach the floor of

the gap, then came to stand next to Arutha. He studied the Prince's face. "it's a good likeness, I'll warrant, but the Prince never wore no beard.'

Then Guy said, "As thick-headed as you are, it's no wonder Armand sent you to Highcastle, Walter of Gyldenholt. '

The man regarded Guy for a long moment, then said "Bloody hell. it's the Duke of Bas-Tyra!"

'And this is the Prince of Krondor.'

The man called Walter kept looking back and forth, he said, 'But you're dead, or at least that's what the royal proclamation said.' He turned to Guy. 'And it's your head to return to the Kingdom, Your Grace.'

Arutha said, 'Get us to Brian and we'll straighten this out. His Grace is under my protection, as are these others. Now, can we stop this foolishness and ride on. There's an army of Dark Brothers and goblins a day or so behind us, and we think Brian would appreciate hearing about it.' Walter of Gyldenholt motioned for the man who led the company to turn around. 'Take them to Lord Highcastle. And when it's all sorted out, come back and tell me just what the bloody hell is going on.'

Arutha put down the razor. He ran his hand over his again clean face and said, "So we left the elves and rode straight here.'

Brian, Lord Highcastle, commander of the detachment at Cutter's Gap, said, 'An incredible tale, Highness. Were I not seeing you here with my own eyes, with du Bas-Tyra sitting there, I'd not have believed a word. The Kingdom thinks you dead. We had a day of memorial in your honour at the King's request.' He sat observing the weary travellers as they cleaned up and ate, in the barracks room he had given over to Arutha and his companions. The old commander was still in posture, as if he were constantly at attention. He looked more a parade ground soldier than a frontier commander. Amos, who was busy gulping a flagon of wine, laughed. (if you're going to have one of those, it's best to do it before you're dead so you can enjoy it. Shame you

missed it, Arutha.'

Guy said, 'Have you many of my men with you?'

Highcastle said, 'Most of your officers were sent to Ironpass and Northwarden, but we've two of your better ones here: Baldwin de la Troville, and Anthony du Masigny. And a few remain at Bas-Tyra. Guiles MarlineRules rules in your city now, as Baron du Corvis.'

Guy said, 'He'd like to be Duke, no doubt.'

Arutha said, 'Brian, I'd like to evacuate back to Sethanon. That's Murmandamus's obvious target and the city could benefit from your soldiers here. This position is untenable.'

Highcastle said nothing for a long moment, then said, 'No, Highness.'

Amos said, 'Say no to the Prince? Ha!'

The Baron cast a sidelong glance toward Amos, then said to Arutha, 'You know my charter and charge. I am vassal to your brother, no one else. I am given the security of this pass. I will not abandon it.'

'My gods, man!' said Guy. 'Will you not take our word? An army of more than thirty thousand is marching here and you've what, one, two thousand soldiers spread over the hills from halfway to Northwarden to halfway to Tyr-Sog. He'll overrun you in a half day.'

'So you say, Guy. I have no firsthand knowledge that what you say is true.' Arutha was stunned, while Amos said, 'Now you're

calling the Prince a liar!'

Brian ignored Amos. 'I have no doubt you've seen some heavy concentration of Dark Brothers up north, but thirty thousand seems unlikely. We've been dealing with them for years and our best intelligence is that there couldn't be any force of them larger than two thousand in the field under one commander. We can easily handle that many from this position.'

Guy spoke in controlled fury. 'Have you been daydreaming while Arutha's been speaking, Brian'? Didn't he tell you we lost a city with a sixty-foot-high wall, approachable from only one side, defended by seven thousand battle-tested soldiers under my' command?' 'And who has long been recognized as the finest

military mind in the Kingdom?' asked Arutha.

Highcastle said, 'I know of your reputation, Guy, and against Kesh you've performed well. But we Border Lords face unusual situations as a matter of course,~ I'm sure we can deal with these Dark Brothers.' The Baron pushed himself away from the table and moved toward the door. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I have my duties to see to. You may continue to rest here as long as you Wish, but remember, here I am the supreme commander

until the King decides otherwise. Now I judge you all need rest. Please feel free to dine with my officers and myself, in two hours. I'll send a guard to wake you.'

Arutha sat down at the table. After Highcastle had left, Amos said, 'The man's an idiot.'

Guy leaned forward, chin in hand. 'No, Brian's just doing his duty as he sees fit. Unfortunately, he's no general. His patent came from Rodric, as something of a joke. He's a southerner, a court noble with no prior battle training. And he's had little trouble' with the goblins up here.'

'He came to Crydee once when I was a boy,' said Arutha. "I thought him a dashing fellow. The Border Lords.' The last was said with bitter humour.

'He'll do as he wishes,' said Guy. "And he's had mostly trouble-makers like Walter of Gyldenholt sent to his service. Armand sent him here five years ago for stealing from the company treasury. He had been a senior Knight-Lieutenant before that.

'But,' added Guy, 'because of politics, some good men are here as well. Baldwin de la Troville and Anthony du Masigny are both first-rate officers. They had the misfortune to be loyal to me. I'm sure it was Caldric who suggested to Lyam they be sent to the border.'

Amos said, "Still, what good? Do you propose we incite a mutiny?'

Guy said, 'No, but at least when the butchering begins, the garrison will die under some competent officers along with the fools.'

Arutha leaned back in a chair, feeling fatigue course through his body. He knew they must do something soon, but what? His mind spun with confusion, and he knew it was dulled by lack of sleep and by tension. No one in the room spoke. After a moment Locklear rose and made his way to one of the bunks and lay down. without words to the others, he was quickly asleep.

Amos said, 'That's the best idea I've heard in weeks.'

He made his way to another bunk and, with a deep groan of satisfaction, settled into the soft embrace of the down comforter. "I will see you at supper.' The others followed his example. Soon all were asleep except Arutha, who tossed and

turned, his mind visited by visions of hosts of goblins and moredhel overrunning his nation, killing and burning. His eyes refused to stay closed, and at last he sat up, a cold sweat upon his body. He glanced about and saw the others were all slumbering. He lay back and waited for sleep to come, , but he was still awake when the, call for supper came.



## Creation

Macros opened his eyes.

The sorcerer had entered a trance within minutes of discovering they were in the time trap, and had been motionless since. After watching him for several hours, Pug and Tomas had grown bored and turned their attentions to other matters. They had tried to discover all they could about the Garden, but as it was a mixture of alien plant and animal life, much of what they saw was difficult to understand. After what seemed days of exploration, the sorcerer hadn't stirred and they had resigned themselves to waiting.

'I think I've thought of a solution,' Macros said, stretching. 'How long have I been in trance!'

Tomas, who sat nearby on a large rock, said, 'I estimate about a week.' Pug moved from where he had been observing, at Ryath's side, and said, 'Or it could be more. It's hard to tell.'

Macros blinked and stood up. 'Moving through time backwards does make it somewhat academic, I'll admit. But I had no idea I'd been contemplating so long.'

Pug said, "You haven't given us much idea of what is going on here. I tried several things to discover what is occurring about us, and have only gained a little notion of how this time trap works.'

'What have you learned about the trap?'

Pug's brow furrowed. 'it appears the spell was designed to reverse time in a field about us. As long as we're in that field, we are subject to its effect and cannot change it. We're carried along with the Garden, moving at a leisurely pace backward through the timestream.' Frustration showed clearly in his tone. "Macros, we've plenty of fruit and nuts, but Ryath is hungry. She has managed to get by on some of the small game around here, and even has managed to eat some nuts, but she can't go on this way much longer. Within a short time she'll have hunted out the game, and then she'll begin to starve. '

Macros looked over to where the golden dragon lay in a doze, to conserve energy. 'Well, we must get out of here, then, by all means.'

'How?' said Tomas.

'it will be difficult, but I expect you two will be up to it.' He managed to smile, returning to something of the confidence he had exuded when both had known him before. 'Any trap has some weakness. Even something as simple as a rock dropped from above has a design flaw: it can miss. I think I've found the flaw in this trap.'

Pug said, it would prove refreshing. I've thought of a

dozen things to do, if I were outside the field of this trap. Ryath has tried to take me outside and we've failed. And I can't think of a thing to do from the inside to fight our flight back through time. '

'The trick, dear Pug, is not to fight the flight backward through time but to accelerate it. We must travel faster and faster, moving at rates undreamed of.'

Tomas said, 'To what ends? We move back further from the conflict. What do we gain?'

"Think, Milamber of the Assembly,' Macros said, using

Pug's Tsurani name. 'if we go back far enough. . .'

Pug said nothing for a while, then understanding began to dawn. 'We go back to the beginning of time.'

"And before . . . when time had no meaning.'

Pug said, "Is this possible?'

Macros shrugged. 'I don't know, but as I can't think of anything else to try, I'm willing. I'll need your help. I have the knowledge but not the power.'

Pug said, 'Tell me what to do.'

Macros motioned for him to sit, and sat opposite him. Tomas stood behind his friend, observing with interest. Macros reached out and placed his hands upon Pug's head. 'Let my knowledge come into you.'

Pug felt his mind fill with images. .

before has he known this sense of panoramic awareness, . and the universe as he knows it shudders. Only once that time he stood upon the Tower of Testing when he entered the ranks of the Great Ones. A more mature, more knowledgeable observer watches this time and understands so much more of what he sees: the symmetry, the order, the stunning magnificence that spin about him, all tied together in some plan beyond his ability to perceive. He stands in awe.

He casts his awareness about and again is astonished at the wonders of the universe about him. Now he again swims between the stars, again perceiving the mystic lines of force that bind together all things in the universe. He detects a tugging on those lines, and sees something striving to enter this universe from another. It is foul, a cancerous thing that threatens the order of all that is. It is a darkness, blotting out. It is the Enemy. But it is weak and cautious. He ponders its nature as it falls away %is understanding. He is moving backward in time. He observes the Garden. He can see himself sitting before the sorcerer, his boyhood friend behind. He knows what he must do. The flow of time about the Garden is stately, moving at rhythms matching the normal rhythm of space and time about him, but

reciprocal in flow, for each passing second, a second in the Garden flows backward.

He reaches out, his mind finding the key to the timeflow, as real to the touch of his spirit being as a stone to his hand. He caresses it and feels the beat of the universe, the secret of the illusory dimension. He sees and he knows. He understands and manipulates that flow, and now for each second of passing time in the universe, two seconds pass in the Garden. He feels a calm joy, for he has just accomplished something that only recently he would have judged beyond the ability of any mortal magician. He puts aside his pride and concentrates on the task at hand. Again he manipulates, and for each true second, four now flow about Tomas, Macros, and himself. Again, and again, and again he duplicates his feat, and now for each hour that the universe ages, they flee backward more than a day. Again, and it is two days, then four, then more than a week. Thrice more, and they move at better' than a month for each true hour. Again, again, and again, and soon they pass a year for each hour. He pauses and sends forth his awareness.

His mind soars across the cosmos like an eagle upon the wing, speeding between stars like the mighty bird of prey gliding past the peaks of the Grey Towers. He spies the hot and green-tinted star that is so familiar to him and for a brief instant understands. He is upon Kelewan, discovering the lost lore of the eldar. A year and more back in time have they moved. As fast as the time to think, he returns his consciousness to his personal here and now. Again he manipulates the time flow, and now it is two

years per hour, then four, eight, sixteen. Again he pauses and regards the universe.

The stars revolve in orderly fashion, hurtling through a cosmos so vast that their blinding speed appears little more than a crawl. But they move in odd pattern, their motions inverted, their travels reversed. He considers and again works upon the time frame. He is now master of this practice, possessing abilities to dwarf the wildest ambitions of even the most arrogant member of the Assembly. He is now certain of his own nature, so much more than he had thought, and he manipulates the time flow with ease. A wild thought passes through him: this is to be like a god, then years of training surge uP with the warning: beware pride! Remember, you are but a mortal, and the first duty is to serve the Empire. His teachers at the Assembly did their job well. He ignores the intoxication of his power, rediscovering his wal, the perfect centre of his being, and again manipulates the time flow. A year passes in reverse for each second in the

true universe. Again and again he works his skills upon the time trap of the enemy, accelerating it beyond the expectations of those who fashioned it. Now a decade passes each second and he knows he lives before the time of his birth. In the time it takes to draw breath, he has passed back before the time when Duke Borric's grandfather invaded Crydee. He works another pass of time, and now the Kingdom is only half its future size, With the holdings of Baron von Darkmoor marking its western boundary. Twice more he accelerates the time factor, and the nations of his lifetime are little more than villages, peopled by simpler folks than those who will give rise to nations. Again and again he works his magic. Then the universe rocks. The very fabric of reality is rent. Energies impossible to fathom explode about him, violent beyond his ability to apprehend, and he

Pug opened his eyes. He felt a strange dislocation about him and for a moment his vision blurred. Tomas came to stand beside him and said, 'Are you all right?' Pug blinked and said, "Something out there changed.'

Tomas looked skyward. 'There's something happening. '

Macros regarded the heavens. Odd patterns of energy's whirled madly across the firmament while stars wobbled in the course. 'if we watch, we'll see things calm down in time. We're seeing this from back to front, remember.'

'Seeing what?' asked Pug.

Tomas answered, "The Chaos Wars.' There was a haunted look in his eyes, as if something in what occurred touched him deeply in a place he had not expected. But his face remained a mask while he watched the mad skies above.

'See, even now we are passing into an epoch before the Macros nodded. Standing up, he pointed heavenward.

Chaos Wars, the Days of the Mad Gods' Rage, the Time of Star Death, and whatever other colourful names myth and lore have conjured up for that period.'

Pug closed his eyes and felt his mind cold and numb, his head throbbing with a dull ache.

Macros said, 'it appears we are moving at the rate of three, four hundred years a second in reverse time.' Pug nodded. 'So for every three seconds, about a millennium passes.' He calculated. 'That's a good start.'

'Start?' questioned Pug. 'How fast need we move!'

'By my best calculation, billions of years. At a thousand years per second, we'll get back to the

beginning in our lifetime. But just barely. We need better.'

Pug nodded, clearly fatigued, but he closed his eyes. Tomas looked skyward. The stars could now be seen to move, though, given their vast distances, it was still a slow movement. But even seeing this much motion was disquieting. Then their movement seemed to accelerate, and soon it was noticeably faster. Then Pug was again with them.

"I've created a second spell within the structure of the trap. Each minute the rate will double without my intervention. We're now moving at a rate in excess of two thousand years per second. In a minute it will be four. Then eight, sixteen, and so forth.'

Macros's expression was one of approval. "Good. That gives us a few hours.' Tomas said, I think it's time for some questions,

then.' Macros smiled, his dark eyes piercing, as he said,

"What you mean is you think it's time for some answers.'

Tomas said, 'Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Years ago you coerced me into betraying the Tsurani peace treaty and on that night you told me you were the author of my current existence. You said you gave me all. Everywhere I look, I see signs of your handiwork. I would know more, Macros.'

Macros sat again. 'Well then, as we have some time to

spend, why not? We are reaching a point in this unfolding drama where knowledge will no longer hurt you. What would you know?' He looked from Tomas to

Pug. Pug glanced at his friend, then looked hard at the

sorcerer. "Who are you?"

'I?' Macros seemed amused by the question. 'I'm . . . who am I?' The question seemed almost rhetorical. "I've had so many names I can't recall every one.' He sighed in remembrance. 'But the one given at my birth translates into the King's Tongue simply as Hawk.' With a smile he said, "My mother's people were a little primitive.' He pondered. 'I'm not sure where to begin. Perhaps with the place and time where I was born. .On a distant world, a vast empire once ruled, at its height a match for Great Kesh and even Tsuranuanni. This empire was undistinguished in most ways - no artists, philosophers, or leaders of genius, save one or two who popped up at odd moments over the centuries. 'But it endured. And the one noteworthy thing it did was inflict peace upon its dominion.

'My father was a merchant, undistinguished in all ways, save he was thrifty, and held loan papers on many of the most powerful men in his community. This I tell you so you'll understand: my father was not someone about whom great sagas are composed. He was a most unremarkable, common man.

'Then, in the land of my father's birth, another .common man appeared, but one with the ability of spell'binding oratory and an irritating habit of making people think. He raised questions that made those in power nervous, for while he was a peaceful man, he gathered followers, and some of them tended toward the radical and violent. So those who ruled levelled a false charge against him. He was brought to closed trial, where no one could raise a voice on his behalf. In the most %anhme and harsh verdict, it was accounted he spoke treason - which was patently false - and he was ordered executed. His execution was to be public, in the fashion of that time. ~', so many of the populace were there, including my father. That poor merchant of few gifts was there with some of his highly placed countrymen, and to please his rulers - who owed him money - . he participated, in mocking and ridiculing the condemned man upon his way to his death. 'For whatever reason, fate's whim or the gods' dry

sense of humour, the condemned man paused in his walk to the place of execution and faced my father. Of all those about who were tormenting and berating him, he cast his eyes upon this one simple merchant. It may have been this man was a magician, or it could simply have been a dying man's curse. But out of all there upon the boulevard, he cursed my father. It was a strange curse, which my father dismissed as the ravings of a man gone mad with terror. 'But after the man had died and the years passed, my

father noticed he wasn't getting any older. His neighbours and business associates were showing the ravages of the years, but my father' looked much as he always did, a merchant of about forty years.

(When the differences became pronounced, my father fled his homeland, lest he be branded a companion of dark powers. He travelled for years. At first he put hiS time to good purpose, becoming a fair scholar. Then he learned the curse for what it really was. A serious accident occurred, leaving him bedridden for most of a year. He discovered death was denied him. Should he be wounded unto death, he would heal eventually.

"He began to long for the release of death, an end to

the endless days. He returned to his homeland, to seek knowledge of this man who had cursed him.

he discovered that myth now shrouded the truth and that the man now stood at the centre of religious debate.

He was seen by some as a charlatan, by others as a messenger of the gods  
by a few as a god himself, and by  
still others a herald of damnation. That debates  
conspired some strife within the empire,

Religious wars are never pretty. But one story kept surfacing: that three magic artifacts associated with the dead man had the power to cure, to bring peace, and finally, remove curses. As I understand it, they were a wand, a cloak, and a cup. My father began at once seeking those artifacts.

Centuries passed, and at last my father came to a tiny nation at the frontier of this empire, where it was supposed the last of the three artifacts could be found - the other two being counted lost beyond recovery.

The empire was at last dissolving, as all such things do, and this land was a wild place. Upon reaching that nation, my father was beset by brigands, who wounded him severely, leaving him for dead. But of course my father simply lay in mute agony, waiting to heal.

A woman found him. Her husband had died in a fishing mishap, leaving her without resources. My father was of an ancient race, steeped in culture and history, but my mother's people, called the People of the Lizard, were barely more than savages. A widow was to be shunned, for any who gave to her assumed responsibility for her. So this woman of nearly nonexistent means nursed my father to health, then lay with him, for she was without a man of her own and my father was, by then, an obviously well learned man, and possibly an important one. The long and short of it was I was conceived.

My father made his intent known to my mother, who professed no knowledge of the artifact my father sought, though it was a common enough legend even in that far land. I suspect she simply wished to keep her second husband close to home.

So, for a time, my father stayed with my mother. In the canon of my father's people, it is said that the child will inherit the sins of the father, but whatever the cause, it is from this legacy

that I sprang. My father remained long enough to teach me his language and his history, and the

rudiments of reading and writing. A rumour made its way to our land, a hint of the lost artifact, and my father

resumed his quest, heading westward across a vast ocean. I never saw him again. For all I know, he quests still. So, my mother packed me up and returned to the village of her birth. 'My mother was left with a son and no reasonable

explanation from where he sprang, as far as her people were concerned, so she concocted some nonsense about mating with a demon. Because of my father's teachings, I was far more educated than the wisest elder among them, so my knowledge gave some credibility to these

stories. 'in short, Mother gained significant influence in the

community. She became a seer, though her abilities were more in the area of theatrics than divination. But I, well I began seeing visions as a child.

'I left my mother when I was fourteen, wandering to where an ancient order of priests abided, in a land that seemed distant from my home at the time - a mere hop, step, and jump compared to the travelling I've done since. They trained me, vesting in me a dying lore. When I took my place within that brotherhood, I was transported in spirit. taken somewhere, and some agency, perhaps the gods themselves, spoke to me. I was judged one among multitudes, a special vessel for rare powers. But there would be a price in taking that power for my own. I was given a choice. I might remain a simple mumblor of prayers, without much importance in the order of things, but i would have a safe and comfortable life, or I might truly learn magic arts. But it was clear there would be pain and danger along that path. I hesitated, but much as I wished for the peaceful existence of the monastic life, the lure of knowledge was too strong to resist. I chose the power, and the price was twofold. I was doomed, like my father, to live without hope of death, and was also given the gift - or curse - of foreknowledge. As I needed to know things, in order to act my part, that knowledge came to me. And from that day forward, I have lived my life in concert with that foreknowledge. I am destined to serve forces that work to bring sanity into the universes, and they are opposed by equally powerful agencies of destruction.'

Macros sat back. 'in short, I am a man who inherited a curse and gained some gifts.'

Pug said, "I think I understand what you're saying. We have considered you the master behind some dark game, but the truth is you are the biggest pawn in the contest.'

Macros nodded. "I alone have not had free will, or at least lacked the courage to challenge my foreknowledge.

I have known from the day I left that priesthood that I would live for centuries and that many times I would be



required to manipulate the lives of others, toward what ends I am only now beginning to understand.'

"What do you mean?" said Tomas.

Macros looked about. 'if things proceed as I suspect, we shall bear witness to that which no other mortal being in the universe, or even the gods themselves, have seen. 'if we survive, we will spend some time returning home. I think we can learn all we need during that time. For now, I am tired, as is Pug. I think I will sleep. Wake me.' 'When?' asked Tomas.

Macros smiled enigmatically. 'You'll know when.'

'macros!'

Macros's eyes opened and he looked to where Tomas pointed. He stretched and rose, saying, "Yes, it's time.'

Pug also awoke and his eyes widened. Above them the stars raced backward in flight as time ran counter to its normal course at furious speed. The skies were ablaze with fiery beauty, as rampaging energies were released in colours of splendid intensity. And light was more concentrated, as if everything seemed to be drawing together. At the centre of this loomed an utter void. It appeared they were rushing down a long, glittering, brightly streaked tunnel toward the darkest hole imaginable.

'This should prove interesting,' observed the sorcerer.

'I know you'll think this odd, but I find it strangely exhilarating not knowing what's coming next. I mean, I know what's likely to happen, but I haven't seen it.'

Pug said, 'That's fine, but what is this?'

"The beginning, Pug.' Even as he spoke, it appeared

the matter about them was rushing faster and faster toward that total blackness. Now the colours were blending together to a pure white light almost painful to observe.

"Look behind!" said Tomas. They did so, and where real space had been, now the

utter grey of rift-space was seen. Macros applauded in obvious delight. 'Wonderful. It is as I thought. We shall elude this trap, my friends. We are approaching that place where time has no meaning. Watch!'

In a final rush of stunning majesty, all about them collapsed' downward, as if being sucked into the maw of that black nothing. Macros said, "Pug, halt our flight before we are pulled into all that.' Pug closed his eyes and did as he was bid. Faster and faster the last stuff of the universe was devoured by the giant thing before them, until the last vestige, the last mote of matter

vanished into the hole. Then Pug clutched at his temples and cried out in pain. Macros and Tomas moved toward him as his legs

buckled, and helped him to sit. After a moment he said 'I'm all right.' His face was ashen and his brow covered in sweat. 'It's just when the time trap ended, the spell of acceleration ended, it was painful.'

Macros said, 'Sorry. I should have anticipated that.' Almost to himself he added, 'But little of what we know will have any validity here and now.'

Macros pointed upward, where a vast and utter darkness could be seen. It seemed to curve, along a limitless line that moved off beyond the ability of the eye to apprehend. And the Garden and the City Forever hovered at the edge of that boundary.

Macros said, 'Fascinating. Now we know the City does exist outside of the normal order of the universe.'

Macros regarded the massive thing above, counting silently to himself. 'I think it's about time, given how long ago Pug's spells were cancelled.'

'What is this?' asked Tomas, pointing to the impossible black orb against the grey.

'The sum of the universes, Tomas,' answered the sorcerer. 'The primal stuff everything else stems from. It is everything - except this little jot of land we stand on and the City itself. There is so much there that size and distance have no meaning. We are millions of times more distant from the surface of that matter than Midkemia is from its sun, but look how large it looms before us, blotting out more than half the sky. It's staggering to contemplate. Even light cannot escape it, for light has not been created. We are back before time. before the beginning. We are witnesses to the start of all things. Ryath, attend this!' the dragon woke from her torpor. She stretched. She approached to stand behind the three. ~. Macros said, 'Keep watching.'

he turned to regard the utter darkness. For several minutes nothing occurred. As if no air moved in the Garden, there was a profound silence. The observers were acutely aware of their own being, feeling each sensation down to the rhythm of the blood coursing through their bodies. But no sound save their own breathing could they apprehend. Then came the note. Each was transported, though they moved not a step. A filling joy, a profound sense of perfect rightness, washed over them, beauty too terrible to comprehend. It was as if music, a single flawless note, sounded and was felt rather than heard. Colours more vivid than any pigment were seen, yet only the dark void hung before their eyes. They felt crushed under the weight of indescribable wonder and terror. They were rendered so

insignificant in an instant that each of them despaired and felt alone, yet in that crystalline instant each experienced exaltation, touched by something so wonderful it brought tears of joy flowing without stint.

It was impossible to comprehend. There was only a flickering, as if a million lines of force sprang across the surface of the void, but they were gone so quickly the watchers could not apprehend their passage. One instant all was black and formless, then a latticework of countless glowing lines spread across the magnificent void, and light filled the skies, staggering in its purity and strength. All were forced to avert their eyes from that blinding display for a moment. A blaze of stunning energies poured forth, as seen before, but now flowing outward. A strange emotion swept through Pug and his companions, one of completeness, as if what they had experienced was now at an end. All continued to weep in joy at the perfect beauty of the display.

'Macros, what was that?' asked Tomas softly, in awe, 'The Hand of God,' he whispered, his eyes wide with wonder. 'The Prime Urge. The First Cause. The Ultimate. I don't know what to call it. I know only this: one moment, there was nothing, the next, all existed. It is the First Mystery, and even now that I've seen it, I do not pretend to understand it.' The sorcerer laughed, a loud joyous sound, and did a little dance.

Pug and Tomas exchanged questioning looks, and Macros saw he was the object of their scrutiny. With an expression of genuine mirth, he said, "It just occurred to me that there's more than one reason we're here.' When their expressions betrayed incomprehension, he said, 'I cannot imagine even a god to be without vanity, and were I the Ultimate, I'd want an audience for a show like that.'

Both Pug and Tomas began to laugh. Macros continued his little caper while he hummed a merry tune.

'Gods, I love a question I can't answer. It keeps things interesting, even after so many years.' Macros paused in his dance and his face clouded in concentration. After a moment, he said, "Some of my powers return.'

pug ceased his laughter. "Some?'

"Enough so that I may more effectively manipulate

your power when needed.' He gave a sly nod. 'And even add something to the total.'

Pug looked upward and regarded the splendour of a newly born universe spreading across the sky. "Compared to that, all our troubles seem pitiful.'

'Well, they may be,' answered the sorcerer, regaining his usual manner. "But there are a few people upon your homeworld who may feel different watching Murmandamus's

army pouring down into the Kingdom. It may be a small planet, but it is the only one they have.' Without knowing how, Pug felt them moving forward through time.

'We are free of the time trap,' confirmed Macros. Pug sat in silent wonder. He had felt something spring into being when he had witnessed the Beginning. Now he gave voice to certainty. Looking at Macros, he said, 'I am like you.'

Macros nodded, an expression of warm affection upon his face. "Yes, Pug, you are like me. I don't know what fate awaits you, but you are not like others. You are of neither the Lesser nor the Greater Path. You are a sorcerer, one who knows there are no paths, only magic. And magic may be limited only by the limits of one's gifts.'

Tomas said, "Can you see your future?"

Pug said, 'No, I am spared that.'

Macros said, 'See, it's not an entirely unlucky thing, being a power. Compared to others, a minor power, but still one to be reckoned with. Now we must escape.' He scanned the madness above as the stuff of creation shot outward, filling the heavens with a staggering beauty. Green and blue swirls of gases, red orbs of fiery splendour, white and yellow streaks of light, sped by, obliterating the grey of rift-space, pushing back the boundaries of nothingness. Then Macros suddenly pointed. 'There!'

Following his hand, they saw what appeared to be a tiny ribbon stretching away from them, some vast distance off in the heavens. 'That is where we must go, and quickly. Hurry, mount Ryath and she will take us. Hurry, hurry.' They mounted upon the dragon's back, and while she was weakened by the meagre food, she was equal to the task. She took to the skies and they were suddenly speeding through the grey of rift-space. Then they again entered normal space and hung over the narrow strip of matter.

Macros ordered the dragon to hover and Tomas to lower them to the pathway. They stood upon a yellowwhite roadway, marked by shimmering silver rectangles every fifty feet or so. Pug looked at the twenty-foot-wide strip and said, 'Macros, we may stand here, but there's the problem of Ryath.'

The sorcerer looked up and spoke rapidly. (Ryath. there is little time. The Hidden Lore. You may either reveal it and trust Pug and Tomas, or perish to hide your race's secret. I argue for trust. You must decide, but quickly.'

The dragon's great ruby eyes narrowed as she regarded

the sorcerer while she hovered. "Was, then, my father so giving to thee, that the forbidden knowledge was shared with a human?"

"I know all, for I was one he counted friend."

The dragon's eyes focused on Tomas and Pug. 'From thee and thy companion, Valheru, an oath: never to reveal that which you are about to witness.'

Tomas said, "on my life."

Pug nodded. 'I swear.'

A golden shimmering encompassed the dragon, faint at first, but growing more pronounced. Soon it was painful to look at. The light grew more intense, until it obscured all details of Ryath's form. Then the outlines began to move, to melt and flow, and contract down as she descended to the roadway. Rapidly the outlines grew smaller and smaller, until they were man-sized. The glow faded. Where the dragon had been there was a stunning woman ~with red-gold hair and blue eyes. Her figure was perfection as she stood before them unclothed.

Pug said, "A shapeshifter!"

Ryath came toward them, and her voice was musical.

'it is not known to men, that we may come and go in their society at will. And only the greater dragons have the art. That is why thy people count our kind diminished, for' we know it is better to look like this when confronting men.'

Tomas said, 'While I can appreciate such beauty, she'll cause quite a stir when we return home unless we find her some clothing.'

Ryath raised a lovely white arm and suddenly was attired in a yellow and gold travelling gown. 'I may accoutre myself as I wish, Valheru. My arts are far mightier than thou suspectest.'

'This is true,' agreed Macros. 'When I lived with Rhuagh he taught me magics unknown to any other mortal race. Never underestimate the scope of Ryath's skills. She has more than fang, flame, and talon to meet opposition.'

Pug regarded the lovely woman and found it difficult to believe that moments before she had bulked larger than the rooftops of buildings. He looked hard at Macros. 'Gathis once said you were always complaining about so much to learn and so little time to learn it. I think I'm beginning to understand.'

Macros smiled. 'Then you are truly beginning your education, Pug.' Macros glanced about them, an almost triumphant expression upon his face, a fiery spark in his eyes.

Pug said, 'What is it?'

"We were trapped, and we had no hope of victory. We still face the possibility of failure, Pug, but now at least we may take a hand - and we have a small chance of victory. Come, we have a long journey ahead.'

The sorcerer led them down the pathway, passing the shimmering rectangles.

Between the rectangles were the rapidly receding stars of the new creation. Slowly the grey of rift-space was creeping about them. "Macros,' said Pug, "what is this place?'

'The strangest place of all, even compared to the City Forever. It is called the Universe Hall, the Star Walk, the Gateway Path, or, most often, the Hall of Worlds, To the majority who pass through it, it is simply the way. We have plenty of time to discuss many things as we walk. We shall return to Midkemia. But there are a few things I need to tell you first.'

'Such as?' asked Tomas.

"Such as the true nature of the Enemy,' said Pug.

'Yes, there is that,' agreed Macros. 'i've spared you some things until the last, for if we couldn't get free' of that trap, why burden you? But now we must ready ourselves for the final confrontation, so you must have the rest of the truth.'

Both sorcerers looked at Tomas, who said, 'I don't understand your meaning.'

'Much of your past life is still hidden from you, Tomas. It is time for those veils to be lifted.'

He halted their walking and reached out his hand, speaking a strange word as he covered Tomas's eyes. Tomas stiffened as he felt memories returning.

A world spun through the void, orbiting a warm, nurturing star. Upon it life flourished in abundance and variety. Two beings straddled the world, each with an assigned task. Rathar took the multitudes of the fibres of life and power, and with care she wove each into the complex latticework of Order, forming a mighty single braided cord. Opposite Rathar stood another, Mythar, who gripped upon the cord, and with terrible wanton frenzy he tore apart the strands, letting them fly about in Chaos, until Rathar seized the strands and again wove them together. Each followed the dictates of his or her nature and to all others was indifferent. They were the two Blind Gods of the Beginning. Such was the nature ,of the universe when it was in its infancy. In the endless process of the two deities' work, tiny strands of the fibres had eluded Rathar, falling to the soil of the world below. From these had come the most wondrous of creation's life.

,'ashen-Shugar was pulled from his mother's womb by the ungentle hands of the moredhel midwife. Hall"

.Nannora drew her sword and slashed the umbilical that tied her son to her. Her face was drawn with the pain of birth as she snarled, "That is the last you'll have from me without a struggle." The moredhel ran with the newborn valheru and handed it over to an elf who waited without the mountain hall.

The elf knew his duty. No Valheru lived without struggle. It was the way of things. The elf carried the silent baby, who had not uttered a sound since birth. The infant had been born aware, a tiny thing, but not one without power. The elf reached the place he had selected and left the

baby exposed atop the rocks, facing the setting sun, unclothed and uncovered. The infant Ashen-Shugar regarded his surroundings,

names and concepts growing with each passing minute. A scavenger came sniffing toward the infant, and with a mental scream of rage the tiny Valheru sent it scurrying. Toward evening a creature flew high above, soaring on broad wings. It regarded the thing upon the rocks and wondered if it was food. Circling lower, it was suddenly called upon by the infant.

Ashen-Shugar saw the giant eagle as it circled and knew it, that it was his creature to command. In primitive images he ordered the giant bird to land, then to hunt. Within minutes the bird returned with a Popping river fish, twice the baby's size, which it shredded with beak and talon, giving the scraps to the baby. As it was for all his kind, Ashen-Shugar's first meal was raw, bloody flesh. For the first night the great eagle covered the infant

with her wings, as she would her own young. Within days a dozen birds cared for the baby.

The Valheru grew quickly, far faster than the children of other races. Within a summer's span the child could run down a deer, killing it with a stunning blast of the mind, and eating its flesh after tearing it from the carcass with bare hands. Other minds occasionally touched the infant's, who

would pull back. Instinctively he knew his own kind were the beings to be feared most, until he had sufficient power to carve his own place in their society.

His first conflict came as he ended his first year with the giant eagles. Another youth, Lowris-Tahara, the so-called King of the Bats, arrived in the dead of night, using his servants to locate the youthful Ashen-Shugar. They struggled, each seeking to absorb the power of the other, but Ashen-Shugar finally prevailed. With the powers of Lowris-Tahara added to his own, Ashen-Shugar began seeking out fit opponents. He hunted other youths, as Lowris-Tahara had hunted him, and seven

others fell before him. He grew in strength and power, taking the title Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches, and flew upon the back of a giant bird in the hunt. He tamed the first of the mighty dragons he would ride, and after destroying his mother in battle, he took her hall as his own. For years he grew in stature, and soon he was acknowledged one of the mightiest of his race.

He hunted and took sport with his *moredhel* women', and occasionally mated with one of his own kind when the heat came upon her and powerful lusts overrode the battle urge he felt toward his own kind. Of those unions only two offspring survived. His first child was AlmaLodaka, whom he fathered in his early days, and the "second was Draken-Korin, who resulted from his mating with Alma-Lodaka. Matters of relationship meant nothing to the Valheru, save as points of reference.

' He raided across the heavens with his brethren when the need for plunder rose up within them like a thing of boundless want. He took his eldar servants with him, , riding behind him on the backs of his dragons, to maintain and care for his plunder. He knew the universe, and it trembled at the thunder of the Dragon .-Host when they roared into the skies. Other stargaining races challenged the Valheru, but none survived.

The Contemplators of Per, with their powers to manipulate the stuff of life, were cast down and their skills lost with them. The Tyrant of the Cormoran Empire sent forth the might of a thousand worlds. Ships the size of cities sped through the void to unleash mighty engines of war upon the invaders. The Dragon Lords obliterated them without hesitation, and the Tyrant died screaming in the lowest basement of his palace while his world was destroyed above him. The Masters of Msjinor and their dark magic were swept away by the Dragon Host. The Grand Alliance, the Marshals of Dawn, the Star Brotherhood, all attempted to resist. All were destroyed. Of all who stood before the Valheru, only the Lorekeepers of the Aal, the supposed first race, managed to avoid destruction, but even the Aal could not oppose the Dragon Host. In the multitudes of universes, the Valheru were supreme. For ages Ashen-Shugar lived as his people had always

lived, fearing none, and worshipping only Rathar, She who was called Order, and Mythar, He who was called Chaos, the Two Blind Gods of the Beginning.

Then came the call, and Ashen-Shugar went to meet with his brethren. It was an odd call, one unlike any before, for there was no bloodlust rising in his breast to take them beyond the stars to raid other worlds. Instead it was a call to meeting, where the Valheru would gather, to speak to one another. It was a strange concept.



Upon the plain, south of the mountains and the great forest, they stood in a circle, the hundreds who were the race. In the centre stood Draken-Korin, who called himself Lord of Tigers. Two of his creatures waited one at each hand, powerful arms crossed, their tiger faces set in hence snarls. They were as nothing to the Vallheru only posing as a reminder that Draken-Korin was, by commonly held opinion, the strangest of their kind. He had ideas of new things.

'The order of the universe is changing,' he said, pointing to the heavens. 'Rathar and Mythar have fled, or have been deposed, but for whatever cause, order and Chaos have no more meaning. Mythar let loose the strands of power and from them the new gods arise. Without Rathar to knit the strands of power together, these beings will seize that power and establish an order. It is an order we must oppose. These gods are knowing, are aware, and are challenging us.'

.When one appears, kill it,' answered Ashen-Shugar, unconcerned by Draken-Korin's words.

'They are our match in power. For the moment they struggle among themselves, seeking each dominion over the others as they strive to gain mastery of that power left by the Two Blind Gods of the Beginning. But that struggle will end and then shall our existence be threatened. They will turn their might upon us.'

Ashen-Shugar said, "What cause for concern? We fight as we have before. That is the answer.'

'No, there needs be more. We must fight in harmony, 'not each alone, lest they overwhelm us.'

Of late, an odd voice had come to Ashen-Shugar, a , voice with a name. The name was lost upon him now, but the voice spoke. You must be apart.

'..-~The Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches said, 'Do what you will I will have none of it.' He ordered his mighty golden dragon Shuruga into the sky and flew home.

time passed, and Ashen-Shugar would occasionally %, 'ISmi to the site of his brethren working. A strange "Hq, like the cities on other worlds, was fashioned by arts and the work of slaves. In it the Valheru , even as it was being fashioned. As never before in history, they became for a time a cooperative of beings, their combative nature stemmed by a et, a truce. It was alien to Ashen-Shugar.

ly before the city was completed, Ashen-Shugar n his dragon's back, regarding the work. It was a day, bitter' cold as winter approached.

from above caused Shuruga to trumpet a reply.

Do we fight? asked the gold dragon.

'No. We wait.'

Ashen-Shugar ignored the disappointment he sensed in Shuruga. Another dragon, black as coal, landed and cautiously approached Ashen-Shugar.

"Has the Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches finally come to join us?" asked Draken-Korin, his black and orange striped armour glinting in the harsh light as he dismounted.

"No. I simply watch," answered Ashen-Shugar, dismounting also.

"You alone have not agreed."

"Joining to plunder across the cosmos is one thing, Draken-Korin. This . . . this plan of yours is madness."

"What is this madness? I know not of what you speak.

We are. We do. What more is there?"

"This is not our way."

"It is not our way to let others stand against our will

These new beings, they contest with us."

Ashen-Shugar looked skyward, regarding those signs that indicated Draken-Korin was correct about the struggle for power between the newly aborning gods.

"Yes, that is so." He remembered those other star-faring races they had faced, the mortal beings who had fallen before the Dragon Host. "But they are not like others. They also are formed from the very stuff of this world, as are we."

"What does that matter? How many of our kin have

you killed? How much blood has passed your lips?

Whoever stands against you must be killed, or kill you.

That is all."

"What of those left behind, the moredhel and the

elves?" He used the terms that had come to differentiate between the slaves of the household and the slaves of the fields and woods.

"What of them? They are nothing."

"They are ours." Ashen-Shugar felt a strange presence within himself and knew the other, the one whose name often eluded him, was causing him to be filled with alien cares.

"You have grown strange under your mountains Ashen-Shugar. They are our servants. It is not as if they possessed true power. They exist for our pleasure nothing more. What concerns you?"

"I do not know. There is something" - he paused, as if hearing a call to some other place - "something wrong in the ordering of these events. I think we risk not only ourselves, but the very fabric of the universe."

Draken-Korin shrugged and began returning to his dragon. "What matter? If we fail, then we are dead. What matter if the universe ceases with us?" Draken-Korin returned to his dragon. Mounting, he said, "You

ponder issues that are meaningless.'

Draken-Korin flew off and Ashen-Shugar was left to face these odd, new feelings within himself.

Time passed, and the Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches watched the final work upon Draken-Korin's city. When it was done, Ashen-Shugar came and found his people once more in council. He walked along a broad avenue one lined with tall pillars, each adorned with a tiger's head carving. He was mildly amused by Draken-Korin's vanity.

Walking down a long ramp, he reached the chamber within the earth. He found the vast hall filled with the Valheru. Alma-Lodaka, she who called herself Emerald Lady of Serpents, said, 'Have you come to join us, Father-Husband?' She was flanked by two of her servants, created in open imitation of Draken-Korin's. They were snakes given arms and legs, grown as large as the moredhel. Amber eyes flickered with nictitating membranes as they fixed upon Ashen-Shugar.

'I have come to witness folly.'

Draken-Korin drew his black blade, but another, Alrin-Stolda, Monarch of the Black Lake, cried, 'Spill Valheru blood and the compact is void!'

The Lord of Tigers resheathed his sword. "It is well you come late, or we should have seen an end to your mockery.' Ashen-Shugar said, "I have no fear of you. I only wish

to see what you have fashioned. This is my world, and that which is mine is not to be threatened.'

The others regarded him with cold eyes and Alrin-Stolda said, do what you will, but know our purpose cannot be balked. As mighty as you are, Ruler of the Eagles' Reaches, you cannot oppose us all. Watch as we do what we must.'

In concert, under Draken-Korin's direction, a great magic was forged. For an instant Ashen-Shugar felt a gut-wrenching pain, which passed almost instantly, leaving only a faint memory. A giant stone appeared upon the floor of the hall, a flat-topped, circular green thing with facets, glowing like an emerald lit with inner fire. Draken-Korin came to stand over it, and placed his hand upon it. It pulsed with energy as he said, "Behold the final tool. The Lifestone.'

Without comment, Ashen-Shugar withdrew from the hall, marching back toward the waiting Shuruga. A voice from behind caused him to turn and he saw Alma-Lodaka hurrying after.

'Father-Husband. Will you not join us?'

He felt a strange urgency toward her, almost as when the heat came upon her, but different. He did not

understand the odd feeling. It is affection, came the voice of the other. He ignored that voice and said, 'Daughter-Wife, our Brother-Son has begun that which spells final destruction. He is mad.'

She looked at him strangely. 'I don't know what you mean. I do not know that word. We do what we must. I had wished to have you at my side, for you stand as mighty as any of us, but do what you will. Oppose us at your risk.' With no further words, she left him and returned to the hall where the next great magic would be undertaken.

Ashen-Shugar mounted his dragon and returned to the Eagles' Reaches.

As Ashen-Shugar entered the hall of his mountain domicile, the skies above reverberated with the sound of distant thunder. And he knew the Dragon Host flew between worlds.

For weeks the skies were angry and without substance, as the stuff of creation flowed from horizon to horizon. Madness was without limit in the universe, as the Valheru rose up to challenge the new gods. Time was without meaning, and the very fabric of reality rippled and flowed, and in the centre of his hall, Ashen-Shugar brooded.

Then he summoned Shuruga and flew to that odd place on the plain, that city of Draken-Korin's making. And he waited.

Mad vortices of energy crashed across the heavens. Ashen-Shugar could see the very fabric of time and space rent and folding in upon itself. He knew it was almost time. He sat quietly upon the back of Shuruga and waited.

A clarion sounded, that alarm he had erected in ~" concert with the world, which told him the moment he "had awaited was upon him. Urging Shuruga upward, ,,Ashen-Shugar searched for what he knew must appear '-before the mad display in the skies. The dragon stiffened under him and he saw his prey. The figure of Draken-corin grew discernible as he slowed his black dragon. An odd something appeared in Draken-Korin's eyes, something alien. The other voice said, It is horror.

Shuruga sped forward. The great dragon roared his challenge, answered by Draken-Korin's black. There the two clashed in the sky.

Quickly it was over, for Draken-Korin had surrendered so much of his essence to create the madness which filled the skies.

Ashen-Shugar landed lightly near the twisted body of his foeman and came to stand over him. The fallen Valheru looked up at his attacker and whispered, 'Why?' Pointing upward, Ashen-Shugar said, "This obscenity

should never have been allowed. You bring an end to all we knew.'

Draken-Korin looked heavenward, where his brethren battled the gods. 'They were so strong. We could never have dreamed.' His face revealed his terror and hate as Ashen-Shugar raised his golden blade to end it. "But I had the right!" he screamed.

Ashen-Shugar severed Draken-Korin's head from his shoulders, and suddenly both body and head vanished in a hiss of smoke. Leaving not a trace, the fallen Valheru's essence returned skyward, to mix with that mindless thing of anger which battled the gods. With bitterness Ashen-Shugar said, 'There is no right. There is only power.' Alone of his kind, he could understand the mocking irony in his words. He retired to his cavern to await the final outcome of the Chaos Wars.

Time was without meaning as time itself was a weapon in battle, but in some sense it passed while the new gods warred with what had been the Dragon Host. Then the gods moved in concert, those who had survived the internecine warfare whereby each had established his place in the hierarchy of things, and they focused their unified attention upon the Valheru. They moved as a force of power beyond the maddest dream of draken-Korin, and as a body they cast the Valheru from the universe. They cast them into another dimension of space and time and moved to deny the Valheru a way back. In near-mindless rage the Valheru sought to return home, to reach that thing left against this day, that thing denied to them by one of their own. Ashen-Shugar had prevented their victory, and now they were being blocked from their homeworld. In their anger and anguish they turned their might upon the lesser races of the new universe. From world to world they rampaged, destroying anything and everything in their path. From world after world they tore the essence of life, the secrets of magics, and the powers of suns. Before them lay warm, verdant worlds circling living suns, behind them lay frigid, lifeless orbs spinning about burned out stars. In their frantic attempt to return to the world of their nurturance, they delivered utter ruination to all they touched. Lesser races banded together, attempting to oppose this raging thing. At first they were swept away, then they slowed it, then at last they found a way to escape. One lesser race, called human, turned its full attention to escape, and ways were found to flee. mankind and other races discovered a haven. Gates were opened to other worlds, and the races fled, scattering themselves through time and space.

Great holes in the fabric of the universe were opened. Dwarves and men, goblins and trolls, all came through

the cracks in reality, the rifts between one universe and another. New races, new creatures, came to Midkemia, and upon this world they sought a place.

Then the gods moved to close off the world of midkemia to the Dragon Lords for eternity. They' turned %))"\*r the rifts they had allowed to form, and they sealed , ~. Suddenly the last route between the stars was seiled off. A barrier was erected. The Dragon Host tried in vain to penetrate this curtain, but to no avail. They were denied return to Midkemia's universe and they in fr%ustration, vowing to find means of entrance. then it was over. The Chaos Wars, the Days of the Mad Gods' Rage, the Time of Star Death: by whatever name it would come to be called, the clash between that which was and that which followed was finished. When it was over, and the skies had again been cleansed of insanity, Ashen-Shugar left his cavern. Returning to the plain before the city of Draken-Korin, he observed the aftermath of the mightiest struggle recorded. He landed Shuruga, then allowed the dragon to hunt. For a long time he silently waited for something, he couldn't be sure what. Hours passed, then at last the other voice spoke. What

is this place? 'The Desolation of the Chaos Wars. Draken-Korin's

monument, the lifeless tundra that was once great grasslands. Few living things abide here. Most creatures flee to the south and more hospitable climes.'

Who are you? Ashen-Shugar felt amusement. Laughing, he said, 'I

am what you are becoming. We are as one. So you have said many times.' His laughter ceased. He was the first of his race to laugh. There was a sadness underlying the humour, for to understand humour marked Ashen-Shugar as something beyond any Valheru, and he knew

he was witness to the beginning of a new era.

I had forgotten.

Ashen-Shugar, last of the Valheru, called Shuruga back from his hunt. Mounting his steed, he glanced at the spot where Draken-Korin had been defeated, marked only by ash. Shuruga took to the skies, high above. the aftermath of destruction.

It is worthy of sorrow.

'I think not,' said the Valheru. "There is a' lesson, though I cannot bring myself to know it. Yet I sense you do.' Ashen-Shugar closed his eyes a moment as his head throbbed. The other voice had again vanished from his mind. Ignoring the wonder of this odd personality who had come to influence him over the years, he turned his

attention to his last task. Over mountains the Valheru rode, seeking those things enslaved by his kind. Within the forests of the southern continent, Ashen-Shugar raced over the stronghold of the tiger-men. In a voice loud enough to be heard, he cried, "Let it be known that from this day you are a free people."

The leader of the tiger-men called back, 'What of our master?'

"He is gone. Your destiny is in your own hands. By my

word I, Ashen-Shugar, say this is so.'

Then to the south, to where the serpent race created by Alma-Lodaka resided, he went. And there his words were greeted with hisses of terror and anger. "How may we survive without our mistress, she who is our goddessmother?"

"That is for you to decide. You are a free people."

The serpents were not pleased and set 'about to discover means how their mistress could again be recalled. As a race they made a vow, that until the end of time they would work to bring back her who was their mother and their goddess, Alma-Lodaka. From that day forward, the priesthood became the ultimate power within the society of the Pantathian serpent people. Around the world he flew, and everywhere he passed, the words were spoken. "Your destiny is your own. All are a free people." At last he reached the strange place fashioned by Draken-Korin and the others. There gathered were the elves. Landing upon the plain, the Vallheru said, 'Let the word go forth'. From this moment you are free.'

The elves looked among themselves, and one said, what does this mean?'

'You are free to do as you wish. No one will care for or direct your lives.'

The spokesman bowed and said, 'But, master, those who are wisest among us have gone with your brethren, and with them goes the lore, the knowledge, and the power. We are weak without the eldar. How, then, will we survive?'

'Your destiny is now your own to forge as best you may. Should you be weak you will perish. Should you be strong, you will survive. And mark you well, there are new forces let loose upon the land. Creatures of alien nature are come here, and with them shall you strive or make peace, as you will, for they also seek their destiny. But there will be a new order, and in it must you find a place. It may be you shall need raise yourself above others and exercise dominion, or it may be they will destroy you. Or perhaps peace is possible between you. That is for you to decide. I am done with you all, save

this one last command. This place is forbidden, upon pain of my wrath. Let none enter it again.' With a wave of his hand he fashioned mighty magic and the small city of the Valheru slowly sank under the ground. "Let the dusts of time bury it and let none remember it. This is my will.'

The elves bowed and said, "As it is willed, master, so you will be obeyed.' The eldest of the elves turned to his

brethren and said, 'None may enter this place: let none approach. It is vanished from mortal eye, it is not remembered. '

Ashen-Shugar said, "Now you are a free people.'

The elves, those who had lived most removed from their masters, said, "We shall go, then, to a place where we may live at peace.' They moved to the west, seeking a place where they could live in harmony.

Others said, 'we shall be wary of these new beings, for we are those who have the right to inherit the mantles of power.'

Ashen-Shugar turned and said, 'Pitiful creatures, Have you not observed how power means nothing?"

But the moredhel were already leaving, his words unheard, as they began to dream the dreams of power. They had set foot upon the Dark Path even as they began to follow their brothers to the west. In time their brothers would drive them off, but for now they . were as one.

Others moved silently away, ready to destroy any who opposed them, not content to seek out their master's power, certain of their own ability to take by force of arms whatever they wished. Those elves had been twisted by the forces let loose during the Chaos Wars and were already drawing away from their brethren. They would be called the glamredhel, the mad elves, and as they set out for the north, they turned suspicious eyes upon those moving westward. They would hide themselves away, using science and sorcery plundered from alien worlds to build giant cities in imitation of their masters, to protect themselves from their kindred, while plotting to make war upon them.

Disgusted by their behaviour, Ashen-Shugar returned to his hall, to reside until that time when he was to leave this life, preparing the way for the other. The universe was changed, and within his hall Ashen-Shugar felt himself alien to the newly-forged order. As if reality itself rejected his nature, he fell into torpor, a coma-like sleep, where his being grew and diffused and began to suffuse his armour, the power being passed into artifact to await another who would come to wear his mantle.



At the last he stirred and said, 'Have I erred?  
kNow you know doubt.  
'This strange quietness within, what is it?'  
It is death approaching..  
Closing his eyes, the last Valheru said, 'I thought as  
much. So few of my kind lived beyond battle. It was a  
rare thing. I am the last. Still, I would like to fly Shuruga  
once more. '  
He is gone. Dead ages past.  
Ashen-Shugar struggled with vague memories. Weakly  
he said, "But I flew him this morning.'  
It was a dream. As is this.  
"Am I then also mad?' The thought of what was seen

in Draken-Korin's eyes haunted Ashen-Shugar.  
You are but a memory, said the other. This is but a  
dream. 'Then I will do what is planned. I accept the inevitable.

Another will come to take my place.'  
So it has happened already, for I am the one who came,  
and I have taken up your sword and put upon your  
mantle,' your cause is now mine. I stand against those who  
would plunder this world, said the other.  
The one called Tomas.'

Tomas opened his eyes and then closed them again. He  
shook his head, as if clearing it. To Pug he had been  
silent for only a moment, but the magician suspected that  
many things had passed through Tomas's mind. At last  
Tomas said, 'I have the memories now. Now I understand  
what is occurring.' Macros nodded. He said to Pug, "in all my dealings

with the Ashen-Shugar-Tomas paradox, that most difficult  
of all was how much knowledge to permit Tomas.  
Now he is ready to deal with the greatest challenge of his  
existence, and now he must know the truth. And you as  
well, though I suspect you have already deduced what he  
has learned.' Softly Pug replied, 'At first I was misled by the

enemy's use of ancient Tsurani when it spoke in Rogen's  
vision. But now I realize that was simply because that  
was the language of humans it knew at the time of the  
Escape across the golden bridge. Once I discarded the  
idea that the Enemy was somehow linked to the Tsurani,  
when I considered the presence of the eldar upon  
Kelewan, then I understood. I know what we face, and  
why the truth was hidden from Tomas. It is the worst  
possible nightmare come to life.'  
Macros looked to Tomas. Tomas looked long at Pug  
and there was pain in his eyes. Quietly, he said, "When I  
first remembered the time of Ashen-Shugar I thought my heritage had been

left against the Tsurani invasion. But that was only a small part of it.'

'Yes,' said Macros. "There is more. You now know how a dragon thought extinct for generations - an ancient black - could guard me. '

Tomas's expression was openly one of doubt and worry. With an almost resigned note, he added, "And i now know the purpose of Murmandamus's masters.' He waved his hand around them. "The trap was less to prevent Macros from reaching Midkemia than it was to bring us here, keeping us away from the Kingdom.'  
"Why?' asked Pug.

' Macros said, "For in our own time Murmandamus commands an army and strikes into your homeland. Even as you searched for me in the City Forever, I wager he was overrunning the garrison at Highcastle. And I know his purpose in invading the Kingdom. He needs to reach Sethanon.'

'Why Sethanon?' asked Pug.

'Because by chance that city is built over the ruins of an ancient city of Draken-Korin,' answered Tomas.

'And within that city lies the Lifestone.'

" The sorcerer said, "We'd best continue walking while we discuss these problems, Pug, for we've got to return to Midkemia and our own era. Tomas and I can tell you of the city of Draken-Korin and the Lifestone. That part you are ignorant of, though you know the rest, the enemy, that thing you learned of upon Kelewan, is not a single being. It is the combined might and mind of the valhheru. The Dragon Lords are returning to Midkemia, and they want their world back.' With a humourless grin he said, "And we've got to keep them from taking it.'

17

## Withdrawal

Arutha studied the canyon.

He had ridden out before first light with Guy and Baron Highcastle to observe the advancing elements of Murmandamus's forces. From the spot where he and his companions had been intercepted by Highcastle's men, they could see campfires in the distance.

Arutha pointed. "Do you see, Brian? There must be a thousand fires, which means, five, six thousand soldiers. And that is only the first elements. By this time tomorrow there will be twice that number. Within three days Murmandamus will be throwing thirty thousand or more at you.' Highcastle, ignoring Arutha's tone, leaned forward

over his horse's neck, as if straining to see more clearly.

"I only see fires, Highness. You know it is a common

trick to build extra fires, so the enemy can't gauge your strength or disposition. '

Guy swore under his breath and turned his horse around. 'I'll not wait to explain the obvious to idiots.'

"And I'll not sit and be insulted by a traitor!"

Highcastle shot back.

, Arutha rode between them, saying, "Guy, you swore no oath of fealty to me, but you're alive this minute because I've accepted your parole. Don't let this become an issue of honour. I don't need duels now. I need you.' Guy's one good eye narrowed and he seemed ready for more hot words, but at last he said, 'I apologize, . . . my lord. The rigours of a long journey. I'm sure you understand.' At the last, he spurred his horse back toward the garrison.

Brian Highcastle said, "The man was an insufferably arrogant swine when he was Duke, and it seems two years wandering about the Northlands hasn't changed him in the least.'

Arutha spun his horse around and faced Lord Highcastle. His words showed he was at the limit of his patience. 'He's also the finest general I've ever known, Brian. He just watched his command overrun, his city utterly destroyed. He has thousands of his people scattered throughout the mountains and he doesn't know how many survived. I'm sure you can appreciate his shortness of temper. ' The sarcasm of the last remark revealed his own frustration.

Lord Highcastle was silent. He turned and regarded the camp of the enemy as the dawn came.

Arutha tended his horse, the one taken from the ' brigands in the mountains. A bay mare, she was resting and regaining lost weight, Arutha had used one loaned him by Baron Highcastle that morning. In another day the mare would be fit to ride south. Arutha had expected the Baron at least to offer him an exchange of animals, but, Brian, Lord Highcastle, seemed to be taking delight in "pointing out at every opportunity that as a vassal to Lyam, he had no obligation to Arutha, save being barely civil.

Arutha was not sure if Brian would even offer to give him an escort. The man was an insufferable egotist. not very perceptive, and stubborn - qualities not unexpected in a man shunted off to the frontier to hold it against small bands of badly organized goblins, but not those of the commander one would wish to face a battle-hardened, well-led invading army.

The stable door opened and Locklear and Jimmy walked in. They halted when they saw Arutha, then Jimmy approached. , 'We were coming to check the horses.' Arutha said, 'I cast no blame on your stewardship,

Jimmy. I simply like to see to such things for myself when I can afford the time. And it gives me a chance to think. '

Locklear sat down on a hay bale, between Arutha's mount and the wall. He reached out and patted the mare's nose. "Highness, why is this happening?" "You mean why the war?" "No, I think I can understand someone wanting to

conquer, or at least I've heard enough about such wars in the histories. No, I mean the place. Why here? Amos was showing us some Kingdom maps upstairs and . . . it doesn't make any sense.' Arutha paused in combing his mount. "You've just

touched upon the single biggest cause for concern I have. Guy and I have discussed it. We just don't know. But one thing to be sure of is, if your enemy is doing something unexpected, it's for a reason. And you had best be quick in understanding what that is, Squire, for if you don't, it's likely to be the means of your defeat.' his eyes narrowed. "No, there is a reason Murmandamus is heading this way. Given the timetable for what he is able to do before winter, he must be making for Sethanon, ' But why? There is no apparent motive for him to go there, and once there, he can only hold until spring. Once spring comes, Lyam and I will crush him.' Jimmy pulled an apple from his tunic and cut it in two, giving half to the horse. 'Unless he figures to have this business over and done with before spring.' Arutha looked at Jimmy. "What do you mean?" Jimmy shrugged and wiped his mouth. 'I don't know exactly, except what you said. You have to guess what the enemy is up to. Given the indefensibility of the city he might be counting on everyone pulling out. Like you said, come spring you can crush him. So, I guess he knows that, too. Now, if I was making straight for some place I could get smashed the next spring, it'd be because I didn't plan on being there in the spring. Or maybe there was something there that gave me an edge - either made me so powerful that I didn't have to worry about being caught between two armies, or kept the armies from coming at all. Something like that.' Arutha rested his chin upon his arm on the back of the horse as he thought. 'But what?' Locklear said, "Something magic?" Jimmy laughed. "We've had no shortage of that since this whole mess began.'

Arutha ran his finger along the chain holding the talisman given him by the Ishopian monks at Sarth.

"Something magic,' he muttered. "But what?"

Quietly Jimmy said, "It'll be something big, I'd guess.'

Arutha fought rising irritation. In his belly he knew Jimmy was right. And he felt frustration close to rage in not understanding the secret behind Murmandamus's insane invasion.

Abruptly trumpets sounded, and were answered almost immediately by the pounding of boot heels upon the cobbles as soldiers rushed to their posts. Arutha was out of the stables in an instant, the boys just behind.

Galain pointed. "There.'

Guy and Arutha looked down from the highest tower of the keep, overlooking the barbican of the fortification.

beyond, in the deep canyon called Cutter's Gap, the first elements of Murmandamus's army could be seen.

'Where's Highcastle?' asked Arutha.

down on the wall with his men,' answered Amos. 'He came in a short time ago, all bloodied and battered.

says the Dark Brothers were up in the hills above his advance position and swarmed down over him. He had to cut his way out. Looks like he lost most of the detachment out there.' Guy swore. 'The idiot. That was where he could have

bottled up Murmandamus's army for a few days. Here, on the walls, it'll be a bloody damned farce.'

The elf said, "it was foolish to underestimate the ability of the mountain moredhel once they get into the rocks.

These are not simple goblins he's facing.'

Arutha said, 'I'm going to see if I can talk to him.' The Prince hurried down through the keep and within a few minutes was standing beside Lord highcastle. The Baron was bloodied from a scalp wound, received when his helm had been knocked off his head. He had not put another on, and his hair was matted with dried blood, The man was pale and shaky, but he still supervised his command without hesitation. Arutha said, 'Brian, can you see what I was talking about?

"We'll bottle them up here,' he answered, pointing to

where the narrow canyon came together before the wall.

'There's no room to stage, so his men will be stopped before the wall. We'll cut them down like wheat before a scythe.' 'Brian, he's bringing an army of thirty thousand

against you. What have you here? Two? He doesn't care about losses, He'll pile his soldiers against your walls, then walk over their' corpses to reach you. They'll come

and come and come again and wear you down. You can't hold out for more than a day or two at the longest.'

The Baron's eyes locked upon Arutha's. "My charter is to defend this position. I may not quit it save by leave of the King. I am charged to hold at all costs. Now, you are not part of my command; please leave the wall.'

Arutha remained motionless for a moment, his face flushed. He left the wall and hurried back to the tower. When he had rejoined those upon the tower, he said to Jimmy, "Go saddle the horses and get all we need for a long ride. Steal what you must from the kitchen. We may have to make a quick exit.'

Jimmy nodded and took Locklear by the sleeve leading the other boy away. Arutha, Guy, Galain, and Amos watched as the leading edge of the invading army moved closer, coming down the canyon like a slowmoving flood.

It began as Arutha had predicted, a wave of soldiers attacking down the narrow draw. The fortress had been built as a staging point for the garrison, with little thought that it would need to withstand a massive attack from an organized army. Now just such an army advanced upon it.

Arutha joined his companions atop the tower, watching as Highcastle's bowmen began slaughtering Murmandamus's advance elements. Then the front ranks of the attackers opened, and goblins with heavy shields hurried forward at a crouch, forming a shield wall. Moredhel bowmen ran and took refuge behind them, then rose and began answering the archers upon the wall.

The first flight of arrows took a dozen of Highcastle's bowmen off the wall, and the attackers streamed forward. Again and again the two sides exchanged missile fire and the defenders stood firm. But the attackers continued to advance toward the wall. but Step by bloody step they came, moving past the bodies Of those who had fallen. Each wave came and fell, moved closer to the walls than the last. An archer would die and another would run forward to take his place. tHen, as the sun breasted the high wall of the canyon,

"the attackers had halved the distance to the wall. By the time the sun had made the narrow transit from wall to %overhead, the distance was narrowed to less than yards. The next wave was unleashed.

Scaling ladders were carried forward, and the defenders exacted a heavy toll on those who carried them, but as each goblin or troll fell, another took his place carrying the ladder. At last they rested against the wall. Pole arms were employed to topple them, but others

were put in place, and goblins scrambled up to be greeted by steel and flame. Then the battle of Highcastle was truly joined.

Arutha watched as the ragged defenders held again. The final wave had breasted the wall to the south of the barbican, but the reinforcement company had filled the breach and driven them back. With sunset, the trumpets sounded withdraw, and Murmandamus's host pulled back up the canyon. Guy swore. "I've never seen such carnage and waste in

the name of duty.' Arutha was forced to agree. Amos said, "Bloody hell! These border lads might be the dregs and outcasts of your armies, Arutha, but they're a tough and salty crew. I've never seen men give better account of themselves.' Arutha agreed. 'You don't serve on the border for long and not get toughened. Few big battles, but constant fighting. Still, they're doomed if Brian keeps this up.'

Galain said, "We should leave before dawn if we are to get away, Arutha.' The Prince nodded. 'I'm going to speak one last time

with Brian. If he still refuses to listen to reason, I'll ask permission to quit the garrison.'

'And if he doesn't?' asked Amos.

Arutha said, "Jimmy's already got us provisions and a way out. We'll leave on foot if we must.'

The Prince left the tower and hurried back to where he had last seen Highcastle. Looking about, he saw no sight of the Baron. Inquiring of a guard, he was told, 'Last I saw of the Baron was an hour ago. He might be down in the courtyard with the dead and wounded, Highness.'

The soldier's words were prophetic, for Arutha found Brian, Lord Highcastle, with the dead and wounded. The surgeon was kneeling over him, and when the Prince approached, he looked up, shaking his head. 'He's dead.' Arutha spoke to an officer standing by the body.

'Who's second?'

The man said, 'Walter of Gyldenholt, but I think he fell during the overrunning of the forward position. "

'Then who?'

"Baldwin de la Troville and I, Highness, are both

ranked behind Walter. We arrived upon the same day, so who is senior I do not know.'

"Who are you?'

'Anthony 'du Masigny, formerly Baron of Cairy, Highness.'

Arutha recognized the man from Lyam's coronation after hearing the name. He had been one of Guy's

supporters. He still affected a trim appearance. but two years on the frontier had rid him of much of the manner of the court dandy he had displayed at Rillanon.

"if you've no objections, send for de la Troville and Guy du Bas-Tyra. Have them meet with us in the Baron's chambers.'

'i've no objections,' said du Masigny. He surveyed the carnage along the walls and in the courtyard. 'in fact I would welcome a little sanity and order about now.'

Baldwin de la Troville was a slender, hawkish man, in "contrast to du Masigny's neatly trimmed, softer appearance.

As soon as both officers were present, Arutha said, if either of you has any notion of that nonsense about being vassals only to the King and defending this fortress to the death, say so now.'

both exchanged glances, and du Masigny sighed.

"Highness, we were sent here by order of your brother

for' - he cast a glance at Guy - "certain former political indiscretions. We are in no hurry to throw our lives away in futile gesture.' De la Troville said, "Highcastle was an idiot. A brave,

almost heroic man, but still an idiot.

'You'll accept my orders?'

'Gladly,' they both said.

'Then from now forward, du Bas-Tyra is my second in command. You'll accept him as your superior.'

Du Masigny grinned. 'That is hardly new to either of us, Highness.' Guy nodded and returned the smile. "They're good

soldiers, Arutha. They'll do what needs to be done.'

Arutha ripped a map off the wall and laid it upon the table. 'I want half the garrison in saddle within an hour, but all orders are to be by whisper, no trumpets, no drums, no shouts. As soon as possible, I want squads of a dozen men each slipped out the postern gates at oneminute intervals. They're to ride for Sethanon. I think even as we speak Murmandamus is slipping his soldiers through the rocks on either side of the pass to cut off retreat. I don't think we have more than a few hours, certainly not past dawn.' Guy's finger touched the map. "If we send a small

patrol to this point, then this point, just for show, it would slow down any infiltrators and cover some of the noise.

Arutha nodded. "De la Troville, lead that patrol, but don't engage any enemy forces. Run like a rabbit if needs be, and be sure to be back by two hours before dawn. By sunrise this garrison is to be evacuated. not a living man left behind.

Now, the first squads leaving will consist of six able



bodies and six wounded. Tie the wounded to their horses if you must. After today's slaughter, there should be

enough mounts for each squad to take two or three extra, and I want each to carry as much grain as possible. Not all the horses will make Sethanon, but between the grain and rotating the mounts, most should.'

'Many of the wounded won't survive, Highness,' said du Masigny.

"The ride to Sethanon will be a killer, but I want

everyone safely away. I don't care how badly hurt they are, we're not leaving one man behind for the butchers. Du Masigny, I want every dead soldier to be put back on the wall, propped up in the crenels. When dawn comes, I want Murmandamus to think he faces a full garrison.' he turned to Guy. 'That might slow him down a little. Now prepare messages for Northwarden, telling him of what is occurring here. If memory serves, Michael, Lord Northwarden, is far brighter than the late Baron Highcastle.

.Perhaps he'll agree to send some soldiers to harass Murmandamus's flanks along his line of march. I want messages to Sethanon -'

"We have no birds for Sethanon, Highness,' said de laTrovile. "

We are expecting some to be coming by caravan within the month.' He looked embarrassed for his former commander. 'An oversight.'

'How many birds do you have left in the coops?'

"A dozen. Three for Northwarden. Two each for Tyr-sog % and Lon61, and five for Romney.'

: Arutha said, "Then at least we can spread the word Tell Duke Talwyn of Romney to send word to Lyam in rillanon. I want the Armies of the East to march on sethanon. Martin will already be in the field with vandros's army. As soon as he encounters the survivors of Armengar and learns Murmandamus's route, he'll turn his forces around and send the army from Yabon to Hawk's Hollow, where they can cut through the mountains and march this way. We'll send word to Tyr-Sog to get gallopers out to tell him exactly where we are. The garrison from krondor will march as soon as Cardan receives word from martin. He'll pick up troops along the way at Darkmoor.' He seemed vaguely hopeful. 'We may yet survive at Sethanon.'

%WLhoecrekIseasrimsmaid,"He said he had something to do and

w~rdutbhea loghoke~ckabout. 'What nonsense is he aboi:t

now?' It was nearly first light and the last detachment of soldiers was ready to ride out of the garrison. Arutha's

party, the last fifty soldiers, and two dozen extra horses were poised at the gate, and Jimmy was off somewhere. Then the boy dashed into sight, waving for them to be off. He jumped into the saddle, and Arutha signalled for the postern gates to be opened. They were pushed wide and Arutha led the column out. As Jimmy overtook him,

Arutha said, "What kept you?"

'A surprise for Murmandamus.'

Just a candle on top of a small barrel of oil I found, It's on a bunch of straw and rags and things. Should go up in a half hour or so. Won't do much but make a lot of smoke, but it will burn for a few hours.'

'And after Armengar

Amos laughed in appreciation.

they won't be so quick to rush toward a fire.'

Guy said, 'That's a bright one, Arutha.'

Jimmy looked pleased at the praise. Arutha said dr)l~)

%'7mementimy'ss teoxopJbersisgiholn turned dark, while Locklear grinned.

They gained a day. From the time they left the first morning until sundown, they saw no sign of pursuers. Arutha decided Murmandamus must have ordered a thorough search of the empty fortress and would then have to reorder his army for the trek across the High Wold. No, they had stolen the march on the invaders, and they were likely to stay ahead of all but his fastest cavalry.

They could push the horses, rotating the remounts they led, and make between thirty-five and forty miles a day. Some horses were sure to go lame but with luck they would be across the vast, hilly High Wold in a week. Once in the Dimwood, they would have to slow, but the chances of being overtaken would also be less, for those behind would have to be cautious of ambush from among the thick trees.

On the second day they began passing the bodies of those wounded who could not withstand the punishment of the hard ride. Their comrades had followed orders and cut the dead loose from their saddles, not wasting time to bury them, not even stripping them of weapons and armour.

On the third day they saw the first signs of pursuit, vague shapes on the horizon near sundown. Arutha ordered an extra hour's ride, and there were no signs of % behind at dawn.

.." On the fourth day they saw the first village. The soldiers riding past before them had alerted everyone of the danger, and it was now deserted. Smoke came from

one chimney and Arutha sent a soldier to investigate. A  
.banked fire still smouldered, but no one was left. A  
bag of seed grain was found and brought along, but all  
foodstuffs were gone. There was little to comfort  
m%y, so Arutha ordered the village left alone. Had  
the villagers not picked the place clean, he would have  
~oced it burned. He expected Murmandamus's soldiers  
to see to that, but he still felt better for leaving the  
es he had found it.

the end of the fifth day, they saw a company of  
"approaching from behind, and Arutha ordered his  
company to halt and make ready. The riders came close  
enough to be clearly marked as a dozen moredhel sCOuTS,  
but they veered off and moved back toward their main  
army rather than accept the offer to fight the larger  
force. On the sixth day they overtook a caravan, heading  
south, already warned of the approaching danger by the

first units of the garrison to ride past. The caravan  
drivers were moving at a slow, steady pace, but it was  
certain they'd be overtaken by Murmandamus's adVanced  
units within another day, two at the most. Arutha  
rode to where the merchant who owned the wagons sat  
and, riding alongside, shouted, "Cut your horses loose  
and ride them'. Otherwise you cannot escape the Dark  
Brothers who follow!' 'But my grain!' complained the merchant. 'i'll lose

everything.' Arutha signalled a halt. When the wagons were

stopped, he shouted to his command. "Each man take a  
sack of this merchant's grain. We'll 'need it for the  
Dimwood. Burn the rest!"

The protesting merchant ordered his bravos to defend  
his cargo, but the mercenaries took a single look at the  
fifty soldiers from Highcastle and moved away, allowing  
them to take the grain.

'Cut the horses loose!' ordered Guy.

The soldiers cut the horses from their traces, and led  
them away. Within minutes the sacks of grain had been  
removed from the first wagon and passed among the  
soldiers~ including an extra sack for each of the  
merchant's horses. The rest of the wagons and grain were  
fired. Arutha said to the merchant, 'There are thirty

thousand goblins, Dark Brothers, and trolls on the march  
this way, master merchant. If you think I've done you an  
injustice, consider what you would face trundling these  
wagons along the trails of the Dimwood in the midst of  
such company. Now take the grain for your mounts and  
ride for the south. We shall stand at Sethanon, but if you  
value your skin, I'd ride past the city and make for

Malac's Cross. Now, if you want to be paid for this grain, stay in Sethanon, and if we all manage somehow to survive the invasion, I'll recompense you. That's your risk to decide. I've no more time to waste on you.'

Arutha ordered his column forward and, minutes later, was not surprised to find the merchant and his mercenaries riding after them, staying as close to the column as their tired mounts would allow. After a short while, Arutha yelled to Amos, "When we halt, get them some fresh horses from the remounts. I don't want to leave them behind.'

Amos grinned. "They're just about scared enough to behave. Let's let them fall just a little farther behind, then when they catch up with us tonight they'll be bright 'and cooperative lads.'

Arutha shook his head. Even in the face of this backbreaking ride, Amos appreciated the humour of the , moment.

.On the seventh day they entered the Dimwood.

The sounds of fighting caused Arutha to order a halt. He motioned for Galain and a soldier to ride toward the direction of the sound. They returned minutes later, the elf %'It's over.'

they rode to the east to find soldiers from Highcastle earing. A dozen moredhel bodies lay about. The nt in charge saluted when he saw Arutha aPing. 'W e were resting our mounts when they hit ghness. Luckily. another squad was just west of and came running.'

tb looked at Guy and Galain. 'How the hell did head of us!'

Galain said. "They didn't. These have been here all summer, waiting.' He looked about. 'Over there, I think.' He led Arutha to a deadfall, which hid the entrance to a low hut, cleverly concealed by brush. Within the hut were stores: grain, weapons, dried meats, saddles, and other supplies.

Arutha inspected everything quickly, then said, 'This campaign has been long in planning. We can now be certain that Sethanon has always been Murmandamus's objective. '

'But we still don't know why,' observed Guy.

'Well, we'll have to proceed without regard to why. Take anything here that we can use, then destroy the rest. '

He said to the sergeant, 'Have you sighted other companies?'

"Yes, Highness. De la Troville had a camp a mile's ride to the northeast last night. We encountered one of his pickets and were ordered to continue on, so as not to

concentrate too many men in one place.'

Guy said, "Dark Brothers?"

The sergeant nodded. "The woods are swarming with them, Your Grace. If we ride past, they give us little trouble. If we stop, we've snipers to deal with. Luckily they don't usually come in bands as large as this one. Still, it might do well for us to stay on the move.'

Arutha said, 'Take five men from my column and begin to head east. I want word passed that everyone is to keep a watchful eye for these stores of Murmandamus. I expect you'll find them guarded, so look for places where the Dark Brothers begin to object to your trespassing. Anything that can help him is to be destroyed. Now you'd better ride.'

Arutha then ordered another dozen men to ride a halfday to the west, then turn south, so that word of the caches of arms could be spread. He said to Guy, 'Let's get on the march. I can almost feel his vanguard stepping on our heels.'

Du Bas-Tyra nodded and said, 'Still, we might be able to slow him a bit along the way.'

Arutha looked about. 'I've been waiting for a place for an ambush. Or a bridge to burn behind us. Or a narrowing in the trail where we can fell a tree. But there hasn't been a single likely place.'

Amos agreed. 'This is the most bloody damn accommodating forest I've seen. You can march a parade through here and not one man in twenty would miss a step for having to dodge a tree.'

Guy said, 'Well, we take what we can get. Let's be off.'

The Dimwood was a series of interconnecting woodlands rather than a single forest such as the Edder or the Green Heart. After the first three days' travel, they passed a series of meadows, then entered some truly dark and foreboding woods. Several times they waited while Galain mismarked moredhel trail signs. The elf thought some of the moredhel scouts might wander a bit before discovering they were being misled. Three more times they came across caches of Murmandamus's stores. Dead moredhel and soldiers showed their locations. The swords had been tossed into fires to rob them of temper, while the arrows and spears were burned. The saddles and bridles had been cut up and the grain was scattered about the ground or burned. Blankets, clothing, and even foodstuffs had gone to feed the fires.

Late in the second week in the forest, they smelled smoke and had to flee a forest fire. Some overzealous pilaging of one of Murmandamus's caches had resulted

in the fire breaking loose in the woods, now dry from the summer. As they rode away from the advancing fire, Amos shouted, "That's what we should do. Wait until his magnificent bastardness gets into the woods and

burn it down around him. Ha!"

Arutha had lost six horses by the time they left the Dimwood, entering cultivated lands, but not one man, including the merchant and his mercenaries. They crossed twenty miles of farmland, then made camp. After sunset a faint glow on the southern horizon appeared.

Amos pointed it out to the boys. "Sethanon.

They reached the city and were halted at the gate by soldiers of the local garrison. "We're looking for whoever's in command!" shouted the sergeant in charge: his chevrons clearly shown in gold upon the finely tailored green and white tabard of the Barony of Sethanon. Arutha signalled, and the sergeant said, 'We've had

soldiers from Highcastle drifting in for the last half day. They're being given compound in the marshalling yard. The Baron wants to see whoever's in charge of this lot.' 'Tell him I'm on my way as soon as these men are quartered.'

"And who should I tell him that is?"

'Arutha of Krondor.'

The man's mouth opened. 'But. . .'

'I know, I'm dead. Still, tell Baron Humphry I'll be up to his keep within the hour. And tell him I've Guy du Bas-Tyra with me. Then send a runner to the marshalling yard and find out if Baldwin de la Troville and Anthony du Massigny are safely here. If so, have them join me.' The sergeant was motionless for a moment, then

saluted. 'Yes, Highness!'

Arutha signalled for his column to enter the city, and for the first time in months saw the normal sights of the Kingdom, a city busy with the business of citizens who thought they were safely kept from harm by a benevolent monarch. The streets thronged with people busy with the concerns of the market, commerce, and celebration. In every direction Arutha could see only the commonplace, the expected, the mundane. How soon that would change.

Arutha ordered the gates closed. For the last week those who had chosen to take their chances and flee southward had been allowed to leave. Now the city was to be

sealed. More messages had been sent, by pigeon and riders, to the garrisons at Malac's Cross, Silden. and Darkmoor, against the possibility of the other messages not reaching those commanders. Everything that could be done had been done, and all they could do was wait. The scouts who had been positioned to the north had reported that Murmandamus's army was now completely in control of the Dimwood. Every farm between the woodlands and the city had been evacuated and all the inhabitants brought inside the walls. The Prince had instructed everyone to follow a strict schedule. All food was brought to Sethanon, but when time ran out, Arutha had ordered every farm put to the torch. The fall crops not yet harvested were fired, and unpicked gardens were dug up or poisoned and all herds too distant to be brought to the city were ordered scattered to the south and east. Nothing was left behind to aid the advancing host. Reports from the soldiers who had reached Sethanon indicated that at least thirty of murmandamus's caches of stores had been discovered and looted or destroyed. Arutha harboured no illusions.

At best he had stung the invaders, but no real damage had been accomplished save inconvenience.

' Arutha sat in council with Amos, Guy, the officers from Highcastle, and Baron Humphry. Humphry sat in his armour - uncomfortably, for it was a gaudy contraption of fluted scrollwork, designed for show and not for combat.

his golden plumed helm held before him. He had readily acknowledged Arutha's preemption of his command, for given its location, the garrison of sethanon lacked any real battlefield commanders. Arutha had installed Guy, Amos, de la Troville, and du Masigny in key positions. They sat reviewing the disposition of troops and stores. Arutha concluded reading the list and spoke. "We could withstand an army of Murmandamus's size up to two months, under normal circumstances. With what we saw at Armengar and Highcastle, I'm sure the circumstances will not be normal. Murmandamus must be within the city by two weeks, three at longest, otherwise he faces the possibility of an early freeze. The rainy fall weather is beginning, which will slow his assaults, and once winter comes, he'll find a starving army under his command. No, he must quickly enter Sethanon, and prevent us from using up or destroying our stores. "if the very best of situations comes to pass, Martin

will be now leaving the foothills of the CalastiUS Mountains below Hawk's Hollow with the army from

Yabon, upward of six thousand soldiers. But he'll be at least two weeks away. We might see soldiers from Northwarden or from Silden about the same time, but at best we must hold for no less than two weeks and perhaps as long as four. Any longer, and help will be too slow in coming.' He rose. "Gentlemen, all we may do now is wait for

the enemy to come. I suggest we rest and pray.'  
Arutha walked out of the conference room. Guy and Amos came after. All paused, as if considering what they had been through so far, then drifted off their separate ways, to wait for the attackers.

18

Homeward

They walked the Hall.

It seemed a straight thoroughfare, a yellowish white roadway with more glowing silver doors at about fiftyfoot intervals. Macros made a sweeping motion with his arm. 'You walk in the midst of a mystery to match the City Forever, the Hall of Worlds. Here you may walk from world to world, if you but know the way.' He indicated a silver rectangle. 'A portal, giving passage to and from a world. Only a select few among the multitudes may discern them. Some learn the knack through study, others stumble upon them by chance. By altering your perceptions, you may see them wherever they lie. Here' - he waved at a door as they passed - 'is a burned-out world circling a forgotten sun.' Then he pointed to the door on the other side of the Hall."But There is a world teeming with life, a hodgepodge of cultures and societies. but with only one intelligent race.' He halted a moment. "At least, that is what they will be in our own time.' He continued walking. 'At present, I expect these doors empty into swirls of hot gases only slightly more dense than nothing.

'in the futures a complete society exists who travel the Hall, conducting commerce between worlds, yet there are worlds whose entire populations have no knowledge of this place.'

Tomas said, 'I knew nothing of this place.'

'The Valheru had other means to travel,' Macros answered, inclining his head in Ryath's direction. "Without the need, they never paused to apprehend the existence of the Hall, for surely they had the ability. Luck? I don't know, but much destruction was avoided by their remaining ignorant.'

'How far does the Hall extend?' said Pug.

'Endlessly. No one knows. The Hall appears straight,



but it curves, and should I walk a short distance, I would vanish from your sight. Distances and time have little meaning between the worlds.'

He began leading them down the hall.

Following Macros's instructions, Pug had managed to bring them forward in time, to what Macros judged was near their own era. After having accelerated the Dragon Lord time trap, Pug had no difficulty following Macros's direction. The mechanics of the spells used were but logical extensions of what Pug had used to speed up the trap. Pug could only guess if the proper amount of time had passed, but Macros had reassured him that when they started to approach Midkemia, he would know how much adjustment Pug would have to make.

They had been walking and Pug had studied each door in passing. After a while he discovered there was a faint difference between each door, a slight spectral oddity in the shimmering silver light, which provided the clue to which world the door led to. 'Macros, what would occur if one were to step off between doors?' asked Pug.

The sorcerer said, "I suspect you'd be quickly dead if you did so unprepared. You would float in rift-space without the benefit of Ryath's ability to navigate.'

He halted before a door. "This is a necessary shortcut, across a planet, which will more than halve our travel time to Midkemia. The distance between here and the next gate is less than a hundred yards, but be advised' this world's atmosphere is deadly. Hold your breath for here magic has no meaning and you may not protect yourself with arts.' He breathed heavily for a moment, then with a great intake of breath, dashed through the door. Tomas came next, then Pug, then Ryath. Pug squinted and almost exhaled as burning fumes assaulted his eyes and sudden, unexpected weight seemed to pull him down. They were sprinting across a barren plain of purple and red rocks, while overhead the air hung heavy with grey haze in orange skies. The earth trembled, and giant clouds of black smoke and gases were spewed heavenward by the bleeding mountains, glowing with reflecting orange light from volcanoes. The stuff of the world flowed down the sides of those peaks and the air hung heavy with oppressive heat. Macros pointed and they ran .into a rock face, which returned them to the hall

Macros had been silent for hours, lost in thought. He pulled up short, coming out of his reverie, as he halted before a portal. 'We must cut across this world. It should be pleasant.'

He led them through a gate into a lovely green glade.

Through trees they could hear the pounding of waves on the rocks and smell the tang of sea salt. Macros led them along a bluff overlooking a magnificent view of an ocean. Pug studied the trees about them, finding them similar to those upon Midkemia. 'This is much like Crydee.' 'Warmer,' said Macros, inhaling the fragrance of the

ocean. 'it's a lovely world, though no one lives upon it.' With a sad look in his eyes, he said, 'Perhaps someday I'll retire here.' He shook off the reflective mood. 'Pug, we are close to our own era, but still slightly out of phase.' He glanced about. 'I think it a year or so before your birth. We need a short burst of temporal acceleration.'

Pug closed his eyes and began a long spell, which had no discernible effect, save that shadows began moving rapidly across the ground as the sun hurried its course across the sky. They were quickly plunged into darkness as night descended, then dawn followed. The pace of time's passage increased, as day and night flickered, then

blurred into an odd grey light.

Pug paused and said, 'We must wait.' They all settled in, for the first time apprehending the loveliness of the world about them. The mundane beauty provided a benchmark against which to measure all the strange and marvellous places they had visited. Tomas seemed deeply troubled. 'All that I have witnessed makes me wonder at the scope of what we are confronting.' He was silent for a time. 'The universes are such imponderable, immense things.' He studied Macros. 'What fate befalls this universe, if one little planet succumbs to the Valheru? Did my brethren not rule there before?' Macros regarded Tomas with an expression of deep concern. 'True, but you've grown either fearful or more cynical. Neither will serve us.' He looked hard at Tomas, seeing the deep doubt in the eyes of the human turned Valheru. At last he nodded and said, 'The nature of the universe changed after the Chaos Wars, the coming of the gods heralded a new system of things - a complex, ordered system - where before only the prime rules of Order and Chaos had existed. The Valheru have no place in the present scheme of things. It would have been easier to bring Ashen-Shugar forward in time than to undertake what was required. I needed his power, but I also needed a mind behind that power that would serve our cause. Without the time link between him and Tomas, Ashen-Shugar would have been one with his brethren. Even with that link, Ashen-Shugar would have been beyond anyone's control.'

Tomas remembered. 'no one can imagine the depth of

the madness I battled during the war with the Tsurani. It was a close thing.' His voice remained calm, but there was a note of pain in it as he spoke. "I became a murderer. I slaughtered the helpless. Martin was driven to the brink of killing me, so savage had I become.' Then he added, 'And I had come to but a tenth part of my power then. On the day I regained my . . . sanity, Martin could have sent his cloth-yard shaft through my heart.' He pointed at a rock a few feet away and made a gripping motion with his hand. The rock crumbled to dust as if Tomas had squeezed it. 'Had my powers then been as they are now I could have killed Martin before he could have released the arrow - by an act of will.' Macros nodded. 'You can see what the risks were, Pug. Even one Valheru alone would be almost as great a danger as the Dragon Host; he would be a power unrestrained in the cosmos.' His tone held no reassurance. ' "There is no single being, save the gods, who could oppose him.' Macros smiled slightly. "Except myself, of course, but even at my full powers, I could only survive a battle with them, not vanquish them. Without my powers. . .' He let the rest go unsaid. 'Then,' said Pug, (why haven't the gods acted?' Macros laughed, a bitter sound, and waved at all four of them. "They are. What do you think we're doing here? That is the game. And we are the pieces.' Pug closed his eyes and suddenly the odd grey light was replaced by normal daylight. 'I think we're back.' Macros reached out and gripped Pug's hand, closing his eyes as he felt the flow of time through the younger sorcerer's perceptions. After a moment Macros said, 'Pug, we are close enough to Midkemia that you may be able to send messages back home. I suggest you try.' Pug had told Macros of the child and his previously unsuccessful attempts at reaching her. Pug shut his eyes and attempted to contact Gamina.

Katala looked up from her needlework. Gamina sat with eyes fixed, as if seeing something in the distance. Then her head tilted, as if listening. William had been reading an old, musty tome Kulgan had given him, and he put it aside and looked hard at his foster sister. Then softly the boy said, "Mama. . .' Calmly Katala put down her sewing and said, 'What, William?' The boy looked at his mother with eyes wide and said

in a whisper, "It's . . . Papa.' Katala came to kneel beside her son and put her arm around his shoulders. "What about your father?' "He's talking to Gamina.'

Katala looked hard at the girl, who sat as if enraptured, all around her forgotten. Slowly Katala rose and crossed to the door to the family's dining room and softly she pulled it open. Then she was through it at a run. Kulgan and Elgahar sat over a chessboard, while

Hochopepa observed, offering unsolicited advice to both players. The room was thick with smoke, for both the stout magicians were sucking on large, after-dinner pipes, enjoying their effects fully, oblivious to the reactions of the others. Meecham sat nearby putting an edge on his hunting knife with a whetstone.

Katala pushed open the door and said, "All of you, come! "

Her tone and the urgency of her manner caused all questions to be put aside as they followed her back down the corridor to where William sat studying Gamina.

Katala knelt before the girl and slowly passed her hand before the glassy eyes. Gamina didn't respond. She was in some sort of trance. Kulgan whispered, "What is this?" Katala whispered back, "William says she's talking to Pug." Elgahar, the usually reserved Greater Path magician,

moved past Kulgan. "Perhaps I may learn something." He crossed to kneel before William. "Would you do something with me?"

William shrugged noncommittally. The magician said, "I know you can sometimes hear Gamina, just as she can

hear you when you speak to animals. Could you let me hear what she's saying?"

William said, "How?"

"I've been studying how Gamina does what she does,

and I think I might be able to do the same. There's no risk," he said, looking at Katala.

Katala nodded while William said, "Sure. I don't mind."

Elgahar closed his eyes and put his hand upon William's shoulder, and then after a minute he said, "I can only hear . . . something." He opened his eyes. "She's speaking to someone. I think it is Milamber," he said, using Pug's Tsurani name.

Hochopepa said, "I wish Dominic hadn't returned to his abbey. He might be able to listen in."

Kulgan held up his hand for silence. The girl let out a long sigh and closed her eyes. Katala reached for her afraid she might faint, but instead the girl opened her eyes wide, then gave a broad smile and leaped up.

Gamina nearly danced around the room, so excited were her movements as she shouted in mind-speech, "It

was Papa. He talked to me. He's coming back.'  
Katala put her hand upon the girl's shoulder and said,  
'Gently, daughter. Now, stop jumping about and tell us  
what you said, and speak, Gamina, speak.'  
For the first time ever, the girl spoke above a whisper,  
in excited shrieks punctuated with laughter. "I spoke to  
Papa. he called me from somePlace!"  
"Where?" asked Kulgan.

The child paused in her excited dance and tilted her  
head, as if thinking. 'it was . . . just someplace. It had a  
beach and was pretty. I don't know. He didn't say where  
it was. It was just someplace.' She jiggled up and down  
again and started to push on Kulgan's leg. 'We have to  
go!'

.Where?'

'Papa wants us to meet him At a place.'

'What place, little one?' asked Katala.

Gamina jumped a little. 'Sethanon.'

Meecham said, "That's a city near the Dimwood, in the  
centre of the Kingdom.'

Kulgan shot him a black look. 'We know that.'

Unabashed, the franklin indicated the two Tsurani  
magicians, and said, (They didn't . . . Master Kulgan.'  
Kulgan's bushy eyebrows met over the bridge of his nose  
as he cleared his throat, a sign his old friend was right. It  
was the only sign Meecham would get.

Katala attempted to calm the girl. 'Now, slowly, who is  
to meet Pug at Sethanon?'

"Everyone. He wants us all to go there. Now.

'Why?' asked William, feeling neglected.

Suddenly the girl's mood shifted and she calmed. Her  
eyes widened and she said, 'The bad thing, Uncle  
Kulgan! The bad thing from Rogen's vision! It's there.'  
She clutched Kulgan's leg.

Kulgan looked at the others in the room. and finally

Hochopepa said, 'The Enemy?'

Kulgan nodded and hugged the child to him. "When  
child?'

"Now, Kulgan. He said we must go now.'

Katala spoke to Meecham. "Pass word through the  
community. All the magicians must ready to travel. We  
must leave for Landreth. We'll get horses there and ride  
north.' Kulgan said. "No daughter of magic would depend on

such mundane transportation.' His mood was light in an  
attempt to relieve the tension. 'Pug should have married  
another magician.'

Katala's eyes narrowed, for she was in no mood to  
banter. "What do you propose?'

"I can use my line-of-sight travel to move myself and Hocho to locations in jumps, up to three miles or more. It will take time, but far less than by horse. In the end we can establish a portal, near Sethanon, and you and the others can walk through from here. ' He turned to Elgahar. 'That will give all of you time to prepare.' Meecham said, 'I'll come, too, in case you pop into an outlaw camp or some other trouble.' Gamina said, "Papa said to bring others.' 'Who?' asked Hochopepa, placing his hand on the child's delicate shoulder. "other magicians, Uncle Hocho.'

Elgahar said, "The Assembly. He would ask for such a thing only if the Enemy was indeed upon us.' "And the army.'

Kulgan looked down at the little face. 'The army? Which army?'

..Just the army.' The girl seemed at the end of her young patience, standing with small fists upon her hips. Kulgan said, 'We'll send a message to the garrison at Landreth, and another to Shamata.' He looked at Katala. "Given your rank as Princess of the royal house by marriage, it might be time to go dig out that royal signet you routinely misplace. ~we'll need it to emboss those messages.'

Katala nodded. She hugged Gamina, who was quieting down, and said, sStay here with your brother,' child," and hurried out of the room.

Kulgan looked to his Tsurani colleagues. Hochopepa said, "now, at last. The Darkness comes.' Kulgan nodded. "To Sethanon.'

Pug opened his eyes. Again he felt fatigue, but nothing as severe as the first time he had spoken to the girl. Tomas, Macros, and Ryath observed the younger sorcerer and waited. "I think I got through enough that she'll be able to give instructions to the others.' Macros nodded, pleased. "The Assembly will prove little match for the Dragon Lords should they manage to break into this space-time, but they may aid in keeping Murmandamus at bay. so we can gain the Lifestone before him.' "if they reach Sethanon in time,' commented Pug. 'I

don't know how we stand with time.'

'That,' agreed Macros, "is a problem. I know we are in our own era, and logic says we must be there sometime after you last left, to avoid one of the knottier paradoxes possible. But how much time has passed since you left? A month? A week? An hour? Well, we'll know

when we reach there.'

Tomas added, 'if we're in time.'

'Ryath,' said Macros, 'we need to travel some distance to the next gate. There are no mortal eyes upon this world to apprehend the transformation. Will you carry US?' Without comment, the woman glowed brightly and

returned to her dragon form. The three mounted and she took to the sky. 'Fly to the northeast,' shouted Macros as the dragon banked and headed in the indicated direction. For a while they were silent as they flew, no one feeling the need to speak. They sped away from the bluffs and beach, over rolling plateaus covered with chaparral-like growth. Above, a warm sun beat down. Pug weighed everything Macros had said in the last hour. He quickly incanted, so they could speak without shouting. "Macros, you said even one Valheru would be a force unleashed in the universe. I don't think I understand what you meant.'

Macros said, 'There is more at stake here than one world.' He looked down as they sped over a river emerging from a canyon of staggering proportions, running to the southwest to join the sea. He said, 'This wonderful planet stands at risk equal to Midkemia. As does Kelewan, and all other worlds, sooner or later. "Should the Valheru's servants win this war, their

masters will return, and chaos will again be loose in the cosmos. Every world will stand open for the Dragon Host to plunder, for not only will they be unmatched in their wanton destruction, they will be unmatched in might. The very act of returning to this space-time will provide them with a source of mystical power heretofore unthought of, a source of power that would make just one Dragon Lord an object of fear for even the gods.'

'How is such a thing possible?' said Pug.

Tomas spoke. 'The Lifestone. It was left against the final battle with the gods. If it is used. . .' He left the thought unfinished.

They were now flying high above mountains, entering a land of lakes, to the north of rolling plains, as the sun sank in the west. Pug found it difficult to contemplate concepts of utter destruction while flying above this splendid world. Macros pointed and said, 'Ryath! That large island, with the twin bays facing us.'

The dragon descended and landed where Macros instructed. They leaped off her back and waited while she transformed herself back to human form. Then Macros was off, leading them toward a large upthrusting of rock near a stand of pinelike trees. They were before another door, upon the face of the large boulder. Macros

stepped through. Tomas followed, then Pug. As Pug returned to the Hall, a dread shrieked its haunting whisper of rage and struck out at Macros, knocking him to the floor .

Tomas jumped forward, drawing his blade as the life stealer attempted to finish Macros. He ducked as another of the dread attempted to grapple him from behind. Pug was knocked to one side by Ryath as she came through the door. A third dread lunged at the human form dragon and seized' her arm above the elbow. Ryath screamed in pain. Then Tomas's blade lashed out and the dread who

sought to close upon Macros was rest and cried in whispering rage, spinning to face his adversary. He howled and ripped out with his talons. Golden sparks rippled along the front of Tomas's shield as he blocked the strike.

Ryath's blue eyes glowed, turning angry red, and suddenly the dread that was holding her arm shrieked. Foul grey smoke rose from the unliving's hand, but he seemed unable to release his hold. The dragon woman's eyes continued to glow and she stood motionless, with only a slight trembling in her body. The dread seemed to be shrinking, its whispering cries reduced to a reedy fluting. Pug finished an incantation and the third dread was

seized by some sort of fit. He arched backward and his black wings quivered as he fell to the stones of the Hall. Then he rose upward, Pug's slight hand motion the only sign he was using his arts upon the creature. Pug gestured and the creature was moved to a place between worlds, vanishing into the grey void.

Tomas struck out again and again and the dread he faced fell back. Each time the golden sword bit into the black nothingness, hissing energies were released. Now the thing appeared weakened and it sought to escape. Tomas thrust with his blade, impaling the dread as it tried to flee, holding it motionless.

While Pug watched, Ryath and Tomas disposed of the two remaining dread, somehow draining them of their life essences, as the dread suck out the life of others. Pug moved to where Macros lay stunned. He helped the sorcerer to his feet and asked, 'Are you injured?' ! Macros cleared his head with a shake and said, 'Not to any degree. Those creatures can be difficult for a mortal, but I've dealt with them before. That they were stationed before this door shows that the Valheru fear what aid we may bring to Midkemia. If Murmandamus reaches Sethanon and finds the Lifestone . . . well, the dread are but a faint shadow of the destruction that will be



unleashed.'

Tomas said, "how far to Midkemia?"

'That door.' Macros pointed to the one opposite the one they entered. "Through it and we are home.'

They entered a vast hall, cold and empty. It was fashioned from massive stones, fitted together by master crafters. A single throne reared above the hall upon a dais, ' and along both walls deep recesses were set, as if ready to receive statuary.

The four walked forward, and Pug said, 'it is chilly here. Where upon Midkemia are we?'

Macros seemed mildly amused. "We are in the fortress city Sar-Sargoth.'

Tomas spun about to face the sorcerer. 'Are you mad? This is the ancient capital of the original Murmandamus. I know that much of the moredhel lore.'

Macros said, 'Calm yourself. They are all down invading the Kingdom. Should any moredhel or goblins be hanging about, they'll certainly be deserters. No, we can dispose of any obstacles here. It is at Sethanon we must be ready to deal with the ultimate challenge.'

He led them outside, and Pug faltered. Arrived in every direction were stakes of a uniform ten feet in height. Atop each was a human head. Perhaps as many as a thousand stretched away in every direction. Pug whispered, 'Heaven's pity, but how can such evil exist?' 'This, then, completes your understanding, answered macros. Looking at his three companions, he said, there was a time Ashen-Shugar would have thought this nothing more than an object lesson.

Tomas glanced about, and nodded absent agreement. 'Tomas, as Ashen-Shugar, can remember a time when no moral issues existed in the universe. There was no thoughts of right or wrong, only of might. And in that universe all other races were of similar mind, save the Aal, and their view of things was odd even by the standards of those days. Murmandamus is a tool, and he resembles his masters.

'And beings far less evil than Murmandamus have done far worse than this one wanton act. But they do so with some knowledge of their deeds relative to a higher moral principle. The Valheru don't understand good and evil, they are totally amoral, but they are so destructive we must count them a near-ultimate evil. And Murmandamus is their servant, so he is also evil. And he is but the palest shadow to their darkness.' Macros sighed. "It may be only my vanity, but the thought I fight such

evil . . . it lightens my burdens.'

Pug took a deep breath as he gained further insight

into the tormented soul who sought to preserve all Pug held dear. At last he said, 'Where to? Sethanon?' Macros said, 'Yes. We must go and discover what has come to pass, and with luck we shall be able to help. No matter what, Murmandamus must not be allowed to reach the Lifestone. Ryath!'

The dragon shimmered and soon was again her true form. They mounted and she took to the skies. Moving high above the Plain of Isbandia, she circled. She banked and flew to the southwest, and Macros bid her pause as they inspected the destruction of Armengar. Black smoke still issued from the pit where the keep had once stood. 'What is that place?' asked Pug.

'Once called Sar-Isbandia, it was last called Armengar. It was built by the glamredhel, as was Sar-Sargoth, long before they fell into barbarism. Both were made in

imitation of the city of Draken-Korin, using sciences plundered from other worlds. They were vain constructions, won by the moredhel in battle at great cost: first Sar-Sargoth, which became Murmandamus's capital, then Sar-Isbandia. But Murmandamus was killed in the Battle of Sar-Isbandia, when the glamredhel were reputedly obliterated. Both cities were abandoned by the moredhel after his death. Only recently have the moredhel returned to Sar-Sargoth. Men lived in Armengar.'

'There is nothing left,' commented Tomas.

'The present incarnation of Murmandamus paid a price to take it, it seems,' agreed Macros. "The people who lived here were tougher and more clever than I had thought. Perhaps they have hurt him enough that Sethanon still stands, for he must have passed beyond the mountains by now. Ryath! South, to Sethanon.' the mountains by now. Ryath! South, to Sethanon.'

19

Sethanon

Suddenly the city was under siege.

Nothing had happened for a week after Arutha had secured the city, then the eighth day after the gates had been closed, guards reported Murmandamus's army on the march. By midday the city was surrounded by elements of his advance cavalry. and by nightfall picket fires burned along every quarter of the horizon.

Amos, Guy, and Arutha observed the invaders from their command post upon the southern barbican, the main entrance to the city. After a while Guy said, 'it'll be nothing fancy. He'll hit us from all sides at once. These piddling little walls will not hold. He'll be inside

after the first or second wave unless we can think of something to slow him down.'

"The defensive barriers we built will help, but only a

little. We must depend upon the men,' said Arutha. 'Well, those we brought south with us are a solid crew,' observed Amos. "Maybe these parade soldiers here will pick up a thing or two.'

'That's why I spread the men from Highcastle out among the city garrison. Just maybe they'll prove the difference.' Arutha didn't sound hopeful.

Guy shook his head, then rested it on his arms, against the wall. 'Twelve hundred seasoned men, including the walking wounded returned to duty. Three thousand garrison, some local militia, and city watch - most of whom have never seen anything more extreme than a tavern brawl. If seven thousand Armengarians couldn't hold from behind sixty-foot-high walls, what can this lot do here?'

Arutha said, 'Whatever they must.' He said no more as he returned his attention to the fires across the plain.

The next day passed into night, and still Murmandamus staged his army. Jimmy sat with Locklear upon a bale of hay near a catapult position. They, and the squires of Lord Humphry's court, had been carrying buckets of sand and water to every siege engine along the city walls all day, against the need to douse fires. They were all bone-tired.

Locklear watched the sea of torches and campfires outside the walls. 'it somehow looks bigger than at Armengar. It's like we never hurt them at all.'

Jimmy nodded. 'We hurt them. It's just they're closer, that's all. I overheard du Bas-Tyra saying they'll come in a rush.' He was silent for a while, then said, 'Locky you've not said anything about Bronwynn.'

Locklear looked at the fires on the plains. 'What's to say? She's dead and I've cried. It's behind. There's no use in dwelling on it. In a few days I might be dead, too.'

Jimmy sighed, as he leaned back against the inner wall, glimpsing the host around the city through the crenellation in the stones. Something joyous had died in his friend, something young and innocent, and Jimmy mourned its loss. And he wondered if he had ever had that young and innocent thing in himself.

With dawn, the defenders were ready, poised to answer the attackers when they came. But as he did at Armengar, Murmandamus approached the city. Lines of soldiers carrying the banners of the confederations and clans marched out, then opened their line to let their

supreme commander come to the fore. He rode a huge black stallion, equal in beauty to the white steed he had ridden the last time. His helm was silver trimmed black and he held a black sword. Little in his appearance offered a reassuring image, yet his words were soft. They carried to everyone in the city, projected by Murmandamus's arts. "o my children, though some of you have already opposed me, yet am I ever ready to forgive. Open your gates and I will offer solemn vow: any who wishes may quit and ride away, untroubled and unbartied.

Take whatever you desire, food, livestock, riches, and I'll offer no obstacle.' He waved behind him and a dozen moredhel warriors rode forward to sit behind. "I will even offer hostages. These are among my most loyal chieftains. They will ride unarmed and unarmoured with you until you are safe within the walls of whatever other city you wish. Only this I ask. You must open your gates to me. Sethanon must be mine!

Upon the walls the commanders observed this and Amos muttered, 'The royal pig-lover is certainly anxious to get within the city. Damn me if I don't almost believe him. I almost think we could all ride away if we would only giv

him the bloody place.

Arutha looked at Guy. "I almost believe him too. I've never heard of any Dark Brother offering hostages.' Guy ran his hand over his face, his expression one of worry and fatigue, a tiredness born of long suffering and not simply lack of sleep. 'There's something here he wants badly.' Lord Humphry said, 'Highness, can we deal with the

creature?' Arutha said, "It is your city, my lord Baron, but it is

my brother's Kingdom. I'm sure he'd be quite short with us if we went about giving portions of it away. No, we'll not deal with him. As sweet as his words are, there's nothing about him that makes me believe he'd honour his vows. I think he'd willingly sacrifice those chieftains of his without a thought. He's never been bothered by his losses before. I've even come to think he welcomes the blood and slaughter. No, Guy's right. He simply wants inside the walls as quickly as possible. And I would give a year's taxes to know what it is he's after.'

Amos said, "And I don't think those chieftains look happy with the offer either.' Several moredhel leaders were exchanging hurried words with one another behind Murmandamus's back. 'I think things are rapidly becoming less than harmonious among the Dark Brothers.' 'Let us hope,' said Guy flatly.

Murmandamus's horse spun and danced nervously as he shouted, 'What, then, is your answer?' Arutha stepped up on a box, so he might better be seen above the wall. 'I say return to the north,' he shouted. 'You have invaded lands that hold no bounty for you. Even now armies are marching against you. Return to the north before the passes are choked with snow and you die a cold and lonely death, far from your home.' Murmandamus's voice rose as he said, "Who speaks for

the city?'

There was a moment's silence, then Arutha shouted, "I, Arutha Condoin, Prince of Krondor, Heir to the

throne of Rillanon,' and then he added a title not officially his, 'Lord of the West.'

Murmandamus shrieked an inhuman cry of rage and something else, perhaps fear, and Jimmy nudged Amos. The former thief said. "That's torn it. He's definitely not amused . '

Amos only grinned and patted the young man on the shoulder. From the ranks of Murmandamus's army there arose a murmuring as Amos said, "It sounds as if his army doesn't like it either. Omens that turn out false can undermine a superstitious lot like these . '

Murmandamus cried, "Liar! False Prince! It is known the Prince of Krondor was slain! Why do you prevaricate? What is your purpose?'

Arutha stood higher, his features clear to see. The chieftains rode about in milling circles, engaged in animated discussion. He removed his talisman, given by the Abbot at Sarth, and held it forth. "By this talisman am I protected from your arts.' He handed it down to Jimmy.,'Now you know the truth.'

Murmandamus's constant companion, the' Pantathian serpent priest, Cathos came forward at a shambling run. He tugged upon the stirrup of his master's saddle, pointing at Arutha and speaking at a furious rate in the hissing language of his people. With a shriek of rage, Murmandamus kicked him away, knocking him' to the ground. Amos spat over the wall. 'I think that convinced them '

The chieftains looked angry and moved as a group toward Murmandamus. He seemed to recognize the moment was slipping away from him. He spun his mount in a full circle, the warhorse's hooves striking the fallen serpent priest in the head, rendering him senseless. Murmandamus ignored his fallen ally and the approaching chieftains. "Then, foul opposer,' he cried toward the wall, 'death comes to embrace you!' he spun to face his

army, and pointed back at the city'. 'Attack!'

The army was poised for the assault and moved forward. The chieftains could not countermand the order. All they could do was ride at once to take charge of their clans. Slowly the horsemen moved up behind the advancing elements of infantry, ready to rush the gates. Murmandamus rode to his command position as the first rank of goblins walked over the unconscious body of the serpent priest. It was not clear if the Pantathian had died from the horse's kick or not, but by the time the last rank had passed over, only a bloody carcass lay in a robe.

Arutha raised his hand and held it poised, dropping it when the first rank came within catapult range. 'Here,' said Jimmy, handing back the talisman. 'it might come in handy.'

Missiles struck the advancing host and they faltered, then continued forward. Soon they were running toward the walls. While bowmen offered covering fire from behind shield walls. Then the first rank hit trenches hidden by canvas and dirt and fell upon the buried, firehardened stakes. Others threw shields upon their writhing comrades and ran over their impaled bodies. The second and third ranks were decimated, but others came forward, and scaling ladders were placed against the walls, and the battle for Sethanon was joined.

The first wave swarmed up the ladders and were met with fire and steel by the defenders. The men of Highcastle provided the leadership and example that kept the inexperienced defenders of the city from being swept away. Amos, de la Troville, du Masigny, and Guy were linchpins for the defence of the city, always appearing where needed.

For nearly an hour the battle teetered as if poised upon the point of a dagger, with the attackers only barely able to gain a foothold upon the battlements before they were thrown back. Still as one rush was repulsed, another would be mounted from a different quarter and soon it was apparent that all would hinge upon some chance of fate, for the two opposing forces were in equilibrium.

Then a giant ram, fashioned within the dark glades of the Dimwood, was rolled forward, toward the southern gate of the city. Without a moat, there were only the traps and trenches to slow its advance and those were quickly covered with wooden planking laid over the bodies of the dead. It was a tree bole, easily ten feet in diameter. It rolled on six giant wheels and was pulled by a dozen horsemen. A dozen giants pushed from behind using long poles. The thing gathered speed as it rumbled

toward the gate. Soon the horses were cantering and the riders peeled off, turning away from the answering hail of arrows. The sluggish giants were replaced by faster goblins, whose primary task was to keep the thing on course and moving. It rolled toward the outer gates of the barbican, and nothing the defenders could do would stop it. It struck the gates with a thunderous crash, the shattering of wood and protests of metal hinges torn from the walls heralding a breach in the city's defences. The gates were flung back into the barbican, twisting as they fell under the wheels of the ram. The front end of the ram lifted as it bounced off the tilting gates, momentum carrying it upward as it struck against the right wall of the barbican. Suddenly the invaders were provided with a clear entrance to the city. Up the tottering ram and leaning gates the goblins swarmed, gaining the top of the barbican. Suddenly the balance was tipped.

Atop the barbican the defenders were forced back. The invaders reached a point above the inner gate as more goblins and moredhel swarmed up the accidental ramps. Arutha called the reinforcement company forward.

They hurried to where the first goblins were dropping into the courtyard before the massive bar that held the inner gates in place. The fighting before the gates was fierce, but soon goblin bowmen were driving the defenders away, despite the fire directed at them from other parts of the wall. The bar was being hoisted when shrieks and cries went up from outside. The fighting slowed, as those engaged sensed something odd was occurring. Then all eyes looked heavenward. Descending from the sky was a dragon, its scales glinting in the sun. Upon its back three figures could be seen. The giant animal swooped downward with an astonishing roar, as if about to pounce upon the attackers before the gates and the goblins began to flee.

Ryath spread her wings and swooped into a low glide above the heads of the attackers, as Tomas waved his golden sword aloft. She trumpeted her battle cry and the goblins beneath her broke and ran.

Tomas looked about, seeking signs of this Murmandamus, but could see only a sea of horsemen and infantry in all directions. Then arrows began to speed past. Most were harmlessly bouncing off the dragon's scales, but the Prince Consort of Elvandar knew a well-placed shot could strike between the overlapping plates or in the eye and the dragon could be injured. He ordered Ryath to enter the city.

The dragon landed in the market, some distance from the gate, but Arutha was already running toward

them, with Galain behind. Pug and Tomas both leaped lightly down, while Macros was more sedate in his dismount.

Arutha gripped Pug's hand. 'It is good to see you again, and making so timely an entrance.'

Pug said, 'We hurried, but we had some delays upon the way.'

Tomas had been greeted by Galain, and Arutha in turn clasped his hand, both of them obviously pleased to see each other alive. Then Arutha saw Macros. "So you didn't die, then?"

Macros said, "Apparently not. It is good to see you again, Prince Arutha. More pleasant than you can imagine. '

Arutha looked at the signs of battle about him and considered the relative quiet. From distant quarters the sounds of battle carried, signifying only that the assault upon the gate had ceased. "I don't know how long they'll wait before they rush the barbican again.' He glanced down the street toward the gate. 'You gave them a start,' and I think Murmandamus is having trouble with some of his chieftains, but not enough to benefit us, I'm afraid. And I don't think I can hold them here. When they come again, they'll swarm over that ram.'

'We can help,' said Pug.

'No,' said Macros.

All eyes turned toward the sorcerer. Arutha said, "Pug's magic could counter Murmandamus's.'

'Has he used any spellcraft against you so far?'

Arutha thought. 'Why no, not since Armengar.'

'He won't. He must harbour it against the moment he has won into the city. And the bloodshed and ' terror benefit his cause. There is something here he wants, and we must keep him from getting it.'

Arutha looked at Pug. "What is happening here?'

A messenger came running toward them. "Highness The enemy masses for another attack on the gate.'

Macros said, 'Who is your second?'

'Guy du Bas-Tyra.'

Pug looked startled at the news but said nothing.

Macros said, 'Murmandamus will not use magic, except perhaps to destroy you if he can, Arutha, so you must turn command of the city over to du Bas-Tyra and come with us.'

"Where are we going?'

"Some place near here. If all else fails, it will be our

cause to prevent the complete destruction of your nation We must keep Murmandamus from his final goal.'



Arutha considered a moment. He said to Galain, 'Orders to du Bas-Tyra. He is to take command. Amos Trask is to assume his role as second-in-command.' 'Where will Your Highness be?' asked the soldier next to the elf.

Macros took Arutha by the arm. "He'll be someplace where' no one can reach him. If we are victorious, we shall all meet again.' He didn't bother saying what would happen if they were defeated.

They hurried down the street, past shuttered doors as the citizens huddled safely within their homes. One bold boy looked out a second floor window just as Ryath lumbered past, and with wide eyes slammed the window. The sounds of battle came from the walls as they rounded a corner into an alley. Macros spun to face the Prince. 'What you see, what you hear, what you learn must always remain a trust. Besides yourself, only the King and your brother Martin may know the secrets you'll learn today - and your heirs,' he added with a dry note, "if any. Swear.' It was not a request.

Arutha said, 'I swear.'

Macros said, 'Tomas, you must discover where the Lifestone lies, and, Pug, you must take us there.'

Tomas looked about. "it was ages ago. Nothing resembles. . .' He closed his eyes. He appeared to the others to be in some trance state. Then he said, "I feel it.' Without opening his eyes, he said, "Pug, can you take us . . . there?' He pointed down and to the centre of the city. He opened his eyes. "It is below the entrance to the keep.'

Pug said, "Come, join hands.

Tomas looked toward the dragon, saying, "You have done all you can. I thank you.'

Ryath said, 'With thee I shall come, one more time.'

She regarded the sorcerer and then Tomas. 'With certainty do I know my fate. I must not seek to avoid it.'

Pug looked at his companions and said, 'What does she mean?' Arutha's expression mirrored Pug's.

Macros did not speak. Tomas said, 'You have not told us before.'

"There was no need, friend Tomas.'

Macros interrupted. "We can speak of this once we've reached our destination. Ryath, once we have ceased moving, come to us.'

Tomas said, 'The chamber will be large enough.'

'I shall.'

Pug pushed his confusion aside and took Arutha's hand. The other was joined with Tomas's, and Macros completed the circle. They all became insubstantial and began to move.

They sank, and light was denied them for a time. Tomas directed Pug, using mind-speech, until after long minutes in the dark, Tomas spoke aloud. 'We are in an open area.'

With returning solidity, they all felt cold stone beneath their feet and Pug created light about himself. 'Arutha looked up. They were in a gigantic chamber, easily a hundred feet in every direction, with a ceiling twice that high. About them rose columns and next to them stood an upraised (dais.

Then suddenly, with a booming displacement of air, the dragon bulked above them. Ryath said, 'it is near time.'

Arutha said, 'What is the dragon speaking of?' He had seen so many wonders over the last two years the sight of a talking dragon was making no impression on him.

Tomas said, "Ryath, like all the greater dragons, knows the time of her death. It is soon.'

The dragon spoke. 'While we fared between worlds, it was possible I would die of causes removed from thee and thy friends. Now it is clear I must continue to play a part in this, for our destiny as a race is always tied with thine, Valheru.'

Tomas only nodded. Pug looked about the chamber, saying, "Where is this Lifestone?'

Macros pointed to the dais. "There.'

Pug said, 'There is nothing there.'

"To ordinary appearances,' said Tomas. He asked

Macros, "Where shall we wait?'

Macros was silent for a moment, then said, 'Each to his place. Pug, Arutha, and I must wait here. You and Ryath must go to another place.'

Tomas indicated understanding and used his arts to lift himself upon the dragon's back. Then, with a thunderous crash, they vanished.

Arutha said, 'Where did he go?'

'He is still here,' answered Macros. (But he is slightly out of phase with us in time - as is the Lifestone. He guards it, the last bastion of defence for this planet, for should we fail, then he alone will stand between Midkemia and her utter destruction.'

Arutha looked at Macros, then Pug. He moved toward the dais and sat. "I think you had better tell me some things.'

Guy signalled and a shower of missiles came down upon the heads of the goblins rushing the gate. A hundred died in an instant. But the flood was unleashed and du Bas-Tyra shouted to Amos, "Ready to quit the walls! I want skirmish order back to the keep, no rout. Any man

who tries to run is to be killed by the sergeant in charge.' Amos said, "Harsh," but he didn't argue the order. The garrison was on the verge of breaking, the untested soldiers close to panic. Only by frightening them more than the enemy could was there a shred of hope of maintaining an orderly retreat back to the keep. Amos glanced back as the population of the city fled toward the keep. They had been kept out of the streets so that companies could move from section to section without impediment, but now they had been ordered to leave their homes. Amos hoped they would be safely out of the Way before the retreat from the walls began.

Jimmy came running through the melee evolving to the west of where Galain, Amos, and Guy stood, and shouted, "De la Troville wants reinforcements. He's hard pressed upon the right flank.'

Guy said, "He'll have none. If I pull anyone from their own sections, it will open a flood gate.' He pointed to where the goblins had cleared the breach through the outer gate of the barbican once more and were now climbing up the inner gate. The covering fire from moredhel archers was murderous. Jimmy began to leave and Guy grabbed him. 'Another messenger is passing the word to quit the walls on signal. You'll not be able to reach him in time. Stay here.'

Jimmy signalled understanding, his sword at the ready, then suddenly a goblin appeared before him. He slashed out, and the blue skinned creature fell, only to be replaced by another.

Tomas looked down. His friends had vanished, though he knew they were still in the same place, but slightly out of phase with him in time. part of Ashen-Shugar's attempt to hide the gem had been to put the ancient city of Draken-Korin into a different frame of time. He looked across the vast hall where the Valheru had held

their last council, then regarded the giant glowing green gem. He altered his perceptions and saw the lines of power spreading outward, touching, he knew, every living thing on the planet. He considered the importance of what he was to do, and calmed himself. He felt the dragon's mood and acknowledged it. It was a willingness to accept whatever fate brought, but without a resignation to defeat. Death might come, but with it might also come victory. Tomas was somehow reassured by this thought.

"You have told me it is important. Now tell me why.'  
"it was left against the day of the Valheru's returning.  
Arutha nodded.

They understood that the gods were fashioned of the stuff of the world, a part of midkemia. Draken-Korin was a genius among his race. He knew that the power of the gods depended upon the relationship they had with all other living things. The Lifestone is the most powerful artifact upon this world. If it is taken and used, it will drain all power from all creatures down to the tiniest being, giving that power to the user. It can be used to bring the Valheru into this space and time. It does so by providing a surge of energy so vast it cannot be equalled, and at the same time it drains away the source of power for the gods. Unfortunately, it will also destroy all life upon this planet. In one instant, everything that walks, flies, swims, or crawls across Midkemia will die, insects, fish, the plants that grow, even living things too small to see. '

Arutha was astonished. 'Then what will the Valheru have with a dead planet?'

'Once back in this universe, they can war upon other worlds, bringing slaves, livestock, and plants, life in all forms, to reseed. They have no concern for the other beings here, just their own needs. It is truly a Valheru view of things, that all may be destroyed to protect their interests. '

"Then Murmandamus and the invading moredhel will

die as well,' said Arutha, horrified at the scope of the %

Macros considered. 'That is the one thing about this that puzzles me, for to utilize the Lifestone, the Valheru must have entrusted much lore to Murmandamus. It seems impossible that he doesn't know he will die when he opens the portal. The Pantathian serpent priests I can understand. They have worked since the time of the Chaos Wars to bring back their lost mistress, the Emerald Lady of Serpents, whom they regard as a goddess. They have become a death cult and believe that with her return, they will achieve some sort of demigodhead for themselves. They embrace death. But this attitude is unlikely for a moredhel. So I don't understand Murmandamus's motives, unless guarantees have been made. I don't know what they could be, as I don't know what this use of the dread can herald, for they will not perish with the others. And if the Valheru no longer wish them upon this world as they reseed the planet, it will be difficult for the Valheru to rid themselves of the dread. The Dreadlords are powerful beings, and this makes me wonder at the possibility of a compact.' Macros sighed. 'There is still so much we don't know. And any one thing could prove our undoing.'

Arutha said, 'in all this there's one other thing I don't

understand. This Murmandamus is an archmage of some sort. If he needs to come here, why not shape-change, sneak into Sethanon looking like any human and come here unnoticed? Why this marching of armies and wholesale destruction!

Macros said, 'it is the nature of the Lifestone. To reach its proper frame of reference in time and to open the gate to admit the Valheru require an enormous mystic power. Murmandamus feeds off death.' Arutha nodded, remembering a comment Murmandamus had made when he had first confronted Arutha through the dead body of one of his Nighthawks, back in Krondor. 'He sucks energy from each death near him. Thousands have died in his service and opposing him. Had he no need to harbour those energies to open the gateway, he could have blown down the walls of this city like a thing of sticks. Even such a small matter as keeping his barrier up against personal injury costs him valuable energies. No, he needs this war to bring back the Valheru. He would gladly see his entire army to the last soldier die just so long as he can reach this chamber. Now we must seek to block his masters' entrance back into this universe.' He stood up. 'Arutha, you must remain vigilant against mundane attack.' He came to Pug and said, 'We must aid him, his foe will prove mighty: most surely, Murmandamus will come to this room.'

Pug took Macros's hand and watched as the sorcerer reached out and gripped the Ishapian talisman. Arutha nodded, and Macros took it from the Prince. Macros closed his eyes and Pug felt powers within himself being manipulated by another, a feat again new and startling to him. Whatever skills he had, were still as nothing to those lost to Macros. Then Arutha and Pug watched as the talisman began to glow. Softly, Macros said, 'There is power here.' He opened his eyes and said, 'Hold out your sword.'

Arutha did so, hilt first. Macros released Pug's hand and carefully placed the talisman below the hilt, so the tiny hammer lay next to the forte of the blade. He then gently closed his hand around the blade and hammer. 'Pug, I have the skill, but I need your strength.' Pug took Macros's hand and the sorcerer again used the younger mage's magic to augment his own diminished powers. Macros's hand began to glow with a warm, yellow-orange light, and all heard a sizzling sound while smoke came off the sorcerer's hand. Arutha could feel the blade warm to the touch.

After a few moments the glow vanished and Macros's hand opened. Arutha looked at the blade. The talisman had been somehow embedded into the steel, now appearing only as a hammer-shaped etching in the forte.

The Prince looked up at Macros and Pug.  
'That blade now holds the power of the talisman. It will guard you from all attacks from mystic sources. It will also wound and kill creatures of dark summoning, piercing even Murmandamus's protective spells. But its power is limited to the strength of will within the man who holds it. Falter in your resolve and you will fall. Remain steadfast and you shall prevail. Always remember that.  
'Come, Pug, we must ready ourselves.'

Arutha watched as the two sorcerers, one ancient and robed in brown and one young and wearing the black robes of a Tsurani Great One, stood facing each other, next to the dais. They joined hands and closed their eyes. A disquieting silence fell over the chamber. After a minute, Arutha pulled his attention from the two magic users and began inspecting his surroundings. The chamber seemed empty of any artifact or decoration. One small door, waist-high in the wall, seemed the only means of entrance. He pulled it open, and glanced in, seeing a hoard of gold and gems lying in the next chamber. He laughed to himself. Ancient treasure, riches of the Valheru, and he'd trade it all to have Lyam's army on the horizon. After a moment of poking about the treasure, he settled in to wait. He absently tossed and caught a ruby the size of a plum, wishing he knew how his comrades above were faring in the battle for Sethanon.

'Now!' shouted Guy, and the company directly under his command began to fall back from the barbican, while behind them trumpeters sounded the call to withdraw. In every quarter of the city the call was answered and, in as coordinated a retreat as possible, the walls were surrendered to the attackers. Rapidly the defenders fell back, gaining the cover of the first block of houses beyond the bailey, for the moredhel archers upon the wall began taking a heavy toll. Companies of Sethanon archers waited to offer answering fire over the heads of the retreating skirmishers, but it was only through exceptional bravery that a total rout was avoided. Guy pulled Jimmy and Amos along, watching over his shoulder while his squad fell back to new positions. Galain and three other archers offered covering fire. As the front rank of attackers reached the first major intersection, a company of riders erupted from the side street. Sethanon cavalry, under the command of Lord Humphry, rode among the goblins and trolls, trampling them underfoot. In a few minutes the attackers were being slaughtered and began withdrawing the way they

had come.

Guy waved to Humphry, who rode over. "Shall we harry them, Guy?"

"No, they'll regroup shortly. Order your men to ride

the perimeter, covering where necessary, but everyone is to fall back to the keep as quickly as possible. Don't do anything too heroic.'

The Baron acknowledged his orders, and Guy said, 'Humphry, tell your men they did well. Very well.' The stout little Baron seemed to perk up and saluted smartly, riding off to take command of his cavalry.

Amos said, "That little squirrel's got teeth.'

'He's a braver man than he looks,' answered Guy. He quickly surveyed his position and signalled his men back. In a moment they were all running toward the keep.

When they reached the inner bailey of the city, they ran toward the keep. The outer fence was a decorative thing of iron bars, which would be torn down in moments, but the inner, ancient fortress wall still looked difficult to attack. Guy hoped so. They gained the first parapet overlooking the battle and Guy sent Galain to see if his other commanders had reached the keep. When the elf had gone, he said, 'Now, if I could only know where Arutha has vanished to?'

Jimmy wondered as well. And he also wondered where

Locklear was.

Locklear hugged the wall, waiting until the troll turned his back to him at the sound of the scream. The girl was no more than sixteen and the other two children considerably younger. The troll reached for the girl, and Locklear leaped out and ran him through from behind. Without saying anything, he reached out and grabbed the girl's wrist. He tugged and she followed, leading the other two children.

They hurried toward the keep, but the squire halted when a squad of horsemen was driven backward across their path. Locklear saw that Baron Humphry was the last man to quit the fray. The Baron's horse stumbled and goblin hands reached up and pulled Humphry from his saddle. The stout little ruler of Sethanon lashed out with his sword, cutting down two of his assailants before finally being overwhelmed by the goblins he faced. Locklear pulled the frightened girl and her companions into an abandoned inn. Once inside, he searched until he spied the trapdoor to the cellar. He opened it and said, 'Quickly. and be silent!'

The children obeyed and he followed after. He felt

about in the dark and found a lamp, with steel and flint next to it. In a short moment he had a light burning. He glanced around while sounds of fighting filtered down from the street above. He pointed toward a large pair of barrels and the children hurried over to crouch between them. He pushed on another barrel and rolled it slowly before the others, creating a small place to hide. He took his sword and the lamp and climbed over to sit with the others.

'What were you doing running down the street?' he asked in a harsh whisper. 'The order for noncombatants to leave came a half hour ago.'

The girl looked frightened but spoke calmly. "My mother hid us in the cellar.'

Locklear looked incredulous. 'Why?'

The girl regarded him with mixed expression and said, "Soldiers. '

Locklear swore. A mother's concern over her daughter's virtue could cost all three of her children their lives. He said, 'Well, I hope she prefers you dead to dishonoured. '

The girl stiffened. "She's dead. The trolls killed her. She fought them while we ran.'

Locklear shook his head, wiping his dripping forehead with the back of his hand. 'Sorry.' He studied her for a moment, then recognized she was indeed pretty. "I really am sorry.' He was silent, then added, "I've lost someone, too.'

A thump on the floor above, and the girl stiffened more, fear making her eyes enormous as she bit the back of her hand to keep from screaming. The two smaller children clung to each other and Locklear whispered, 'Don't make a sound.' He put his arm about the girl and blew out the lamp and the cellar was plunged into darkness.

Guy ordered the inner gate to the keep closed, and watched as those too slow to reach it safely were cut down by the advancing horde. Archers fired from the battlements, and anything that could be hurled at the attackers was thrown - boiling water and oil, stones, heavy furniture - as the last, desperate attempt to resist the onslaught began.

Then a shout went up from the rear of the invading army and Murmandamus came riding forward, trampling his own soldiers as often as not. Amos waited beside Guy and Jimmy, ready for the first scaling ladders to be brought forward. He looked at the frantically hurrying moredhel leader and said, "The dung-eater still seems in a hurry, doesn't he? He's a bit rough on the lads who



happen to be in his way.'

Guy shouted, "Archers, there's your target!" and a storm of arrows descended about the broad-shouldered moredhel. With a scream the horse was down and the rider fell and rolled. He leaped to his feet, unharmed, and pointed toward the keep doors. A dozen goblins and moredhel raced forward, to die under bow fire. Most bowmen concentrated upon the moredhel leader, but none could harm him. The arrows would harmlessly strike some invisible barrier and bounce off.

Then a ram was carried forward, and while dozens of invaders died, it at last reached the doors and was brought to bear. Moredhel archers kept the defenders down, while the rhythmic pounding began.

Guy sat with his back to the stones, as flight after flight of moredhel arrows sped overhead. 'Squire,' he said to Jimmy, 'hurry downstairs and see if de la Troville has his company together. Order him to be ready at the inner door. I think we have less than ten minutes before they're inside.' Jimmy hurried off, and Guy said to Amos, 'Well, you pirate . . . it looks like we gave them a good run.'

Hunkering down beside Guy, Amos nodded. 'The best. All things considered, we did all right. A little more luck here or there, and we'd have had his guts on a stick.' Amos sighed. "Still, there's no use dwelling on the past, I always say. Come along, let's go bleed some of those miserable land rats.' He leaped to his feet and grabbed the throat of a goblin who had just cleared the wall. The creature had not seen any defenders, and suddenly there was Amos, seising him by the throat. With a jerk he crushed the creature's windpipe, and cast him back down the ladder, dislodging three more who were right behind him. Amos pushed the ladder away as Guy slashed with his sword at another who climbed through a crenel beside Amos.

Amos stiffened and gasped and, looking down, discovered an arrow in his side. 'Damn me!' he said, apparently astonished by the fact. Then a goblin breasted the wall, and struck out with his sword, the impact nearly spinning Amos around. The former sea captain's knees buckled, and he fell hard to the stones. Guy cut the goblin's head from his shoulders with a savage blow. He knelt next to Amos and said, "I've told you to keep your damn head down.'

Amos smiled up at him. "Next time I'll listen,' he said weakly, then his eyes closed.

Guy whirled as another goblin came over the wall, and with an upward thrust he gutted the creature. The Protector of Armengar, former Duke of Bas-Tyra, slashed right and left, bringing death to any goblin, troll,

or moredhel who came close to him. But the outer wall of the keep was breached, and more invaders swarmed over, and Guy saw himself being slowly surrounded. Others on the wall heard the call for retreat and hurried down the stairs to stand within the great hall, but Guy stood over his fallen friend with sword ready, not moving.

Murmandamus walked over the bodies of his own soldiers, ignoring the cries of the dying and wounded around him. He entered the barbican of the keep, passing the shattered outer doors. With a curt motion of his hand he ordered his soldiers forward with the ram to begin the assault upon the inner door. He moved to one side while they began beating on the door, their comrades seeking to rid the walls of Sethanon archers. For an instant all within the killing ground of the barbican were intent upon the splintering door, and Murmandamus stepped back into the shadows, silently laughing at the folly of other creatures. With each death he had gained power and now he was ready.

A moredhel chieftain ran into the killing ground seeking his master. He brought word of the battle in the city. Fighting over spoils had broken out between two rival clans, and while they had been distracted, a pocket of defenders had escaped certain annihilation. The master's presence was required to keep order. He grabbed one of his underlings and asked Murmandamus's whereabouts. The goblin pointed, and the chieftain shoved the creature away, for the dark corner he indicated was empty. The goblin ran forward to 'work upon the ram, for another soldier had fallen to arrows from above, while the moredhel chieftain continued to look for his master. He asked about, and all said that Murmandamus had vanished. Cursing all omens, prophecies, and heralds of destruction, the chieftain hurried back toward the section of the city where his own clan battled. New orders were about to be given.

Pug heard Macros's words in his mind. They are trying to break through.

Pug and Macros's minds were linked, with a rapport beyond anything Pug had experienced in his life. He knew the sorcerer, he understood him, he was one with Macros. He remembered things from the sorcerer's long

history, foreign lands with alien people, histories of worlds far distant, all was his. And so was the knowledge. With his mystic eye, he could (see' the place they

would attempt to enter. It existed between their physical world and the place where Tomas waited, a seam

between one time frame and another. And something like sound was building, something that he could not hear but could feel. A pressure was rising, as those who sought to enter this world began their final assault.

Arutha tensed. One moment he had been watching Pug and Macros standing like statues, then suddenly another moved in the vast hall. From out of the shadows came the giant moredhel, his face a thing of beauty and horror as he removed his black dragon helm from his sweating brow. Bare of armour, his chest revealed the dragon birthmark of his heritage, and in his hand he held a black sword. He fixed his eyes upon Macros and Pug and moved toward them.

Arutha stepped out from behind a pillar, standing between Murmandamus and the two motionless mages. he held his sword at the ready. 'Now, baby killer, you have your chance,' he said.

Murmandamus faltered, his eyes growing wide. "How -" Then he grinned. "I thank the fates, Lord of the

West. You are now mine.' He pointed his finger and a silver bolt of energy shot forward, but it was warped to strike the blade of Arutha's sword, where it danced like incandescent fire, pulsing with white-hot fury. Arutha flicked his wrist and the point of the blade touched the stone floor. The fire winked out.

The moredhel's eyes again widened, and with a shriek of rage he leaped toward Arutha. 'I will not be denied.' Arutha narrowly avoided a blow of stunning savagery, which caused blue sparks to leap when the black blade struck the stones. But as he moved back, his own sword flicked out and he cut the moredhel upon the arm. Murmandamus shrieked as if some grave injury had been done, and staggered back a moment. He righted himself as Arutha followed the blow with another, and was able to parry the Prince's second thrust. With a look of madness, Murmandamus clutched the wound, then regarded the crimson wetness upon his palm. The moredhel said, "It is not possible!"

With catlike quickness Arutha lashed out, and another cut appeared upon the moredhel, this one across his bare chest. Arutha smiled a smile without humour, one as savage as the moredhel's had been. 'It is possible, scion of madness,' he said with studied purpose. "I am the Lord of the West. I am the Bane of Darkness. I am your destruction, slave of the Valheru.'

Murmandamus roared in rage, the sound of a vanished age of insanity returning into the world, and launched his attack. Arutha stood his ground and they began to duel in earnest.

Pug.

I know.

They moved in concert, weaving a pattern of power erecting a lattice of energies against the intruder. It was not so mighty a work as that used to close off the great rift at the time of the golden bridge, but then this rift hadn't been opened yet. But there was pressure and they were being tested.

The pounding on the door continued as the wood began to splinter. Then came the sound of distant thunder, growing louder. The pounding on the door halted for a moment, then resumed. Twice more the booming sounded, as if coming closer, as the sounds of fighting seemed to be increasing. Then from outside came unexpected cries, and the pounding of the ram on the door ceased. Then an explosion rocked the hall. Jimmy leaped forward. He pulled aside the slide that covered the peephole, then yelled back at de la Troville, "Open this door!"

The commander of the company signed his men forward as the sounds of fighting reached his ears, and it took the strength of most of the men to move the half-detached door. Then they heaved and it opened and de la Troville and Jimmy raced through. Before them men in brightly coloured armour ran through the streets, battling moredhel and goblins on every hand. Jimmy shouted, 'Tsurani. damn, it's an army of Tsurani!' "Can it really be?" said de la Troville. "I've heard enough stories from Duke Laurie to know

what they're supposed to look like. Little fellows, but tough, all in bright coloured armour.'

A squad of goblins turned before the keep retreating from a larger company of Tsurani, and de la Troville led his own men out, taking them in the rear. Jimmy hurried past, and heard another loud explosion. Down a broad avenue he could see a black-robed magician standing before a smoking pile of barrels and an overturned wagon that had been used as a breastwork. The magician began conjuring. Within a moment there Rowed from his hands a heavy rolling ball of energy which struck some target beyond Jimmy's line of sight, exploding in the distance.

Then a company of horsemen came galloping into ~ view, and Jimmy recognized the banner of Landreth. Riding alongside came Kulgan, Meecham, and two black-robed magicians. They reined in and Kulgan left his mount, nimbly for one so stout. He approached Jimmy, who said, "Kulgan! I've never been so glad to see

anyone in my life, I think.'

'Have we arrived in time?' asked Hochopepa. Jimmy had never met the black-robed man, but, given his arrival with Kulgan, Jimmy assumed he had some authority. 'I don't know. Arutha vanished some hours ago with Pug, Macros, Tomas, and a dragon, if you can believe Galain's report to du Bas-Tyra. Guy and Amos Trask are around here somewhere.' He pointed toward some fighting in the distance and said, 'Du Masigny and the others are over there somewhere, I think.' He looked around, his eyes wide with terror and exhaustion. His voice began to sound thick with emotions held too long in check, rising with a near-frantic note. 'I don't know who's left alive.'

Kulgan put his hand on Jimmy's shoulder, realizing the boy was close to collapse. 'It's all right,' he said. Looking at Hochopepa and Elgahar, he said, "You'd better look inside. I don't think this battle is truly over yet.'

Jimmy said, 'Where are all the Dark Brothers? There were thousands around here only a . . . few minutes ago?'

Kulgan led the boy away, while the two black-robed magicians ordered a squad of Tsurani soldiers to accompany them into the keep, where the sounds of fighting could still be heard. To Jimmy, the green-robed magician said, 'Ten magicians of the Assembly came to join us, and the Emperor sent part of his army, so much did they fear the appearance of the Enemy upon this world. We created a gate between the portal on Stardock and a place less than a mile from the city, but out of sight of Murmandamus's arms. We marched three thousand Tsurani here along with the fifteen hundred horse from Landreth and Shamata, and more are coming.'

Jimmy sat. 'Three thousand? Fifteen hundred? They ran from that?'

Kulgan sat next to him. 'And the Black Robes, whose magic they cannot oppose. And the news that Martin is upon the plain with the army from Yabon, four thousand strong, less than an hour away to the northwest. And I'm sure their scouts saw the dust from the southwest, where the soldiers from Darkmoor are marching beside those from Malac's Cross, followed by Cardan's regiments from Krondor. And all can see the banners of Northwarden to the northeast. and in the east the King comes with his army, one or two days away at most. They are surrounded, Jimmy, and they know it.' Kulgan's voice turned thoughtful. 'And something had already disturbed them, for even as we approached we saw bands of Dark Brothers quitting the city, fleeing for the Dimwood. At least three or four thousand seemed to have already abandoned the attack. And many of those

between the gate and here were not organized, and some even seemed to be falling out among themselves, with one band fighting another. Something has happened to blunt the attack at the moment of victory.'

Then into view came a detachment of Keshian dog soldiers, running rapidly toward the sound of battle. Jimmy looked at the magician and began to laugh as tears started to run down his cheeks. "I guess that means Hazara-Khan's come to play, too?'

Kulgan smiled. 'He happened to be camped near Shamata. He claims it was coincidence he was having dinner with the governor of Shamata when Katala's message to come to Stardock with the garrison arrived. And of course the facts that he convinced the governor to let him bring along some observers and that his people were ready to march within an hour are also coincidence.'

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How many observers?'

'Five hundred, all armed to the teeth.

'Arutha's going to die an unhappy man if he can't get Abdur to admit there is an Imperial Intelligence Corps.'

Kulgan said, "But what I can't fathom is how does he know what's going on at Stardock?'

Jimmy laughed a genuinely amused laugh. He sniffed as his nose began to run and smiled. "You must be joking. Half your magicians are Keshian.' He sighed and sat back. 'But there must be more to it, mustn't there?' He closed his eyes, and tears of fatigue again ran down his face.

Kulgan said, "We still haven't found Murmandamus.'

Kulgan looked to where more Tsurani soldiers ran down the street. "Until we do, it's not over.'

Arutha ducked a savage slashing backhand blow and thrust in return, but the *moredhel* jumped backward. Arutha's breath came with difficulty, for this was the most cunning and dangerous opponent he had ever faced. He was incredibly strong and only slightly slower than Arutha. Murmandamus bled from a half-dozen minor wounds, cuts which would have weakened a normal opponent, but which seemed to bother him only a little. Arutha gained no advantage, for the battle and this duel were bringing him to the edge of exhaustion. It took all the Prince's skills and speed to stay alive. He had a limit on his ability to fight, for he had to keep himself between Murmandamus and the two sorcerers, who laboured over some mystic duty. The *moredhel* had no such concern.

The duel had fallen into a rhythm, each swordsman taking the measure of the other. Now they moved almost

in lockstep, each thrust answered with a parry, each riposte with a disengage. Sweat poured off each and made hands slippery, and the only sounds heard were the grunts of exertion. The fight was coming to the stage where the first to make a mistake would be the one to die.

Then a shimmering filled the air to the left, and for an instant Arutha glanced away, only catching himself at the last. But Murmandamus didn't remove his eyes from his opponent and seized the moment, levelling a blow that skidded along the Prince's ribs. Arutha gasped in pain. The moredhel drew back to slash at Arutha's head, and as his hand came forward, it was brought crashing against an invisible barrier. The moredhel's eyes widened as Arutha staggered upright and thrust, skewering Murmandamus through the stomach. The moredhel howled in a dull ululation, staggered, then fell backward, pulling Arutha's sword from weakened fingers. Arutha slumped to the floor as two black-garbed men ran forward to grip him. They hovered over the prince. Arutha's vision clouded and cleared, focused and unfocused, until the room was stable again. He saw Murmandamus smile, as the moredhel spoke in a menacing whisper. 'I am a thing of death, Lord of the West. I am ever the servant of Darkness.' He laughed weakly and blood flowed down his chin, to drip upon the dragon birthmark. I am not what I seem. In my death you accomplish your destruction.' He closed his eyes and fell back, his death rattle filling the room. The two men in black looked on as from Murmandamus's body a strange keening sound came. The figure on the stones puffed up, seeming to swell as if suddenly inflated. Like an overripe pod, from forehead to crotch, Murmandamus's body ripped, revealing an inner body of green scales. Thick black liquid and red blood, with clots of meat and gouts of white pus, were spewn about the room as the green-scaled body seemed to burst from within- the husk that was Murmandamus, hopping on the floor like a freshly landed fish. In this terrible convulsion a leaping flame of bright red appeared, evil and filling the hall with a stench of ages of decay. Then the flame vanished and the universe opened around them.

Macros and Pug staggered where they stood, each somehow aware of a change in the fighting nearby. All their attentions were focused upon the place between the universes where the aborning rift was beginning. Each time a thrust came from the other universe, they answered with a patch of energy. The battle had reached its peak a moment before, and now the thrusts were weakening. But still there was danger, for Pug and

Macros were also exhausted. It would require the utmost concentration to keep the rift between universes from opening. Then pain exploded in their minds as a silver note, a shrieking whistle, sounded a signal. From another quarter a different, unexpected attack came, and Pug could not answer. A thing of captured lives, taken in terrible death and held against this moment came flowing toward the rift, dancing like a mad and stinking red flame. It struck the barriers Pug had erected and shattered them. It tore open the rift and somehow moved between Pug's perceptions and the place where the battle raged, obscuring his sense of what occurred there. Pug felt slightly dazed. Then a warning cry from Macros refocused his attention on the rift, which now stood open. Pug worked frantically, and from some deep hidden reservoir of strength he drew forth the energy to grip the shredding fabric that held the universes apart. The rift closed violently. Again came the thrust, and again Pug barely held, but he held. Then from Macros came the warning, Something got through.

Something has come through, came the warning from Ryath.

Tomas leaped down from the dragon's back and waited behind the Lifestone. A darkness grew within the hall, vast and powerful, a thing of nightmare taking form. Then it stood forth. It was ebon, without feature and definition, a being of hopelessness, and it was aware. Its outline hinted at a man shape, but it bulked nearly as large as Ryath. Its shadow wings spread, casting gloom about the hall like a palpable black light, and about its head, like a crown, burned a circle of flames, angry red-orange and seeming to cast no illumination.

Tomas yelled to Ryath, "It is a Dreadlord, beware! It is a stealer of souls, an eater of minds!"

But the dragon bellowed in rage and attacked the monstrous thing of nightmare, bringing its magic to play as well as talons and flame. Tomas started forward, but a presence, another being entered this phase of time.

Tomas moved back into the shadow while a figure he had never seen before, but one as well known to him as Pug, emerged into the light of the gem. The newcomer dodged away from the towering battle that rocked the hall. With quick steps the figure moved toward the Lifestone.

Tomas appeared out of shadow, standing over the stone so that he was now visible. The figure halted, and a snarl of rage escaped.

Splendid in his orange-and-black armour, the Lord of Tigers, Draken-Korin,' confronted a vision beyond his understanding. The Valheru shouted, 'No! It is impossible.



you cannot still live!

Tomas spoke and his voice was Ashen-Shugar's. 'So, you've come to see it finished.'

With the snarl of a tiger, lost in the shrieks and bellows of the larger battle in the hall, the returned Dragon Lord drew his black sword and leaped forward, and for the first time in his existence Tomas faced an enemy with the power to truly destroy him.

The battle was coming to an end as the host of Murmandamus streamed out of the city, fleeing toward the Dimwood. The word of Murmandamus's disappearance had spread as if blown through Sethanon by a sudden wind. Then, without warning, the Black Slayers, no matter where they were, collapsed as if their lives had been sucked out of their armour. This, along with the arrival of the Tsurani and the magicians and reports of more armies on the horizon, had caused the attack to falter and then fail. Chieftain after chieftain ordered his clans away, quitting the battle. With leadership evaporating, the goblins and trolls were slaughtered, until the still larger invading army was in complete rout.

Jimmy hurried through the halls of the keep, looking among the dead and wounded for anyone he knew. He dashed up the stairs to the wall overlooking the killing ground and found a clot of Tsurani blocking the way. He slipped through them and saw a surgeon from Landreth standing over two bloody men who slumped against the wall. Amos had an arrow still sticking from his side, but was grinning. Guy was covered in gore and had a terrible-looking cut along his scalp. The cut had severed the cord holding the patch over his eye, and the angry, empty red socket could be seen. Amos laughed and almost choked. 'Hey, boy. Good to see you.' He looked about the wall. 'Look at all these little peacocks.' He waved one hand weakly at the brightly clad Tsurani soldiers, who looked on with unreadable expressions. 'Damn me, but they're the prettiest things I've ever seen.'

Then from below came a grinding, followed by a soulchilling thunderous roar, as if some terrible host of madness was suddenly escaping from hell. Jimmy looked around in startled wonder, and even the Tsurani exhibited surprise. A trembling filled the keep as the walls began to shake. 'What's that!' shouted Jimmy. 'I don't know, and I don't plan on staying here to find

out,' said Guy. Gesturing to be helped to his feet, he took the outstretched hand of a Tsurani warrior and got up. He motioned to what appeared a Tsurani officer who ordered men to pick up Amos. Guy said to Jimmy,

"Order whoever's alive to evacuate the keep.' Then the rolling motion below increased and he staggered, while the howling sound grew in volume. 'No, tell whoever's alive to evacuate the city.'

Jimmy ran along the battlement, heading for the stairs.  
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## Aftermath

Again the room trembled and shook.

Arutha listened, clutching his bleeding side. It sounded like a distant battle, with titanic forces unleashed. He went to where Pug and Macros stood, with the two black-robed magicians next to them. He sighed as he nodded to them.

"I am Prince Arutha," he said.

Hochopepa and Elgahar introduced themselves and Elgahar said, "These two are undertaking to hold some power at bay. We must aid them.' The two Black Robes placed their hands upon Macros's and Pug's shoulders and closed their eyes. Arutha found he was alone again. He looked toward the grotesque husk of Murmandamus slumped in the corner. Crossing to where it lay, Arutha reached down and pulled his sword from the serpent man. Arutha studied the slime-covered form of the serpent priest and laughed bitterly. The reincarnated leader of the moredhel nations was a Pantathian. It had all been a ruse - from the centuries-old prophecy', to the marshalling of the moredhel and their allies, to the assault upon Armengar and Sethanon. The Pantathians had simply been using the moredhel, at the command of the Dragon Lords, hoarding the magic of spent lives to reach the Lifestone and use it. In all of it, the moredhel had been used more cruelly than anyone else. It was an irony of heroic proportion. Arutha was astonished by the realization, though he was too tired to do more than weakly scan the room, as if looking for someone with whom to share the revelation. Suddenly a rent appeared in the wall with the small door, and gold, gems, and other treasures were spilled upon the floor. In his fatigue, Arutha hardly wondered how this had come to be. For he had heard no sound of masonry collapsing. Arutha let his sword point drop and turned to walk back to the magicians. Seeing no exit from the vault, he sat upon the dais and watched the four motionless spellcasters as they stood with hands joined. He examined his wound and saw the blood flow had lessened. It was painful, but not serious. He leaned back, getting as comfortable as possible, for he could do nothing but

wait.

Brickwork and masonry were smashed to dust as Ryath's tail drove through the wall. With shrieks of pain and rage, the dragon worked her magic upon the Dreadlord, while fang and talon inflicted injury. But the Dreadlord struggled mightily and the dragon paid a heavy toll in return.

Tomas lashed out, keeping his body between the Lifestone and Draken-Korin. The screaming, snarling Valheru had come at Tomas like the tiger on his tabard. Tomas had not possessed the savage fury of his opponent since the days of madness had been upon him during the Riftwar. But he was a practised warrior and he kept his wits about him.

Draken-Korin shouted, 'You cannot deny us again, Ashen-Shugar. We are the lords of this world. We must return!'

Tomas parried, turning the blade away, then slashed out and was rewarded with a shower of sparks as his blade hit Draken-Korin's armour, rending his tabard. 'You are a decayed artifact of a former age. You are a thing that hasn't the wits to know you're dead. You'd destroy all to win a lifeless planet.'

Draken-Korin swung a looping blow toward the head, but Tomas ducked and thrust, and his sword point took the Valheru in the stomach. Draken-Korin staggered back, and Tomas was upon him like a cat upon a rat. Blow after blow rained down upon the Lord of Tigers and Tomas held the upper hand.

"We shall not be turned away,' screamed Draken-Korin and he redoubled his fury, halting Tomas, then driving him back. In an instant there was a shimmering, and where Draken-Korin had been, Alma-Lodaka now stood, but her attack was no less fierce. "You underestimate us, Father-Husband. We are all the Valheru, you are but one.' Then the face and body changed, as one and another Valheru opposed Tomas. Quickly they shifted, until a blur of faces appeared before Tomas. Then Draken-Korinn was back. "You see, I am a multitude, a legion. We are power.'

"You are death and evil, but you are also the father of

lies,' answered Tomas with contempt. He struck out, and Draken-Korin barely parried. 'Had you the power of the race, I would have been taken in a mere instant. You may shift your form, but I know you are only a single agent, a small part of the whole, slipped here to use the Lifestone to open the portal, so the Dragon Host might enter.'

Draken-Korin's only answer was a renewed attack.

Tomas took the black blade upon his golden one, knocking it aside. At the other side of the hall, the struggle between the dragon and the Dreadlord was nearing a finish, for the sounds of battle were faint and occasional. Then from behind came silence and a terrible

presence.

Tomas felt the Dreadlord approach and knew Ryath had fallen to it. As Ashen-Shugar he had faced the Dreadlord before, and if unencumbered he would not have feared it, but to face it would free Draken-Korin to act, and to ignore it would give it the chance to incapacitate him.

Tomas knocked aside Draken-Korin's next strike and leaped forward, unexpectedly, chancing a blow. The black blade snapped forward, but only glanced against the chain mail under the white tabard. Tomas's teeth clenched in pain as the ebon blade severed the golden links, cutting his side, but he gripped Draken-Korin's arm. With a wrenching twist, he reversed their positions, pushing the Lord of Tigers directly into the Dreadlord's path.

The Dreadlord attempted to halt, but the dragon had exacted a toll before succumbing. The Dreadlord was injured and dazed and his blow struck Draken-Korin from behind, stunning him. Draken-Korin screamed in agony, for he had not erected any protection against the life-draining touch of the Dreadlord.

Tomas thrust and tore a gaping wound in the stomach of the black-and-orange clad Valheru, weakening him more. Draken-Korin stumbled and was again forced to brush against the near-mindless Dreadlord, who shoved him aside. That inadvertent strike propelled Draken-Korin toward the Lifestone.

'No!' shouted Tomas, leaping forward. The Dreadlord lashed out, gripping Tomas for an instant. Pain flooded Tomas's being, and he struck out with his sword, causing a hissing shower of sparks where he hit the night-dark creature. It echoed a windy cry and let go. Quickly Tomas lashed out at the heart of the unliving creature, a near-mortal wound which caused it to stagger back.

Tomas spun toward where Draken-Korin attempted to reach his goal.

Draken-Korin stumbled and fell forward across the Lifestone, as if to embrace it. He laughed, even as he felt his energies begin to dissipate, for he still had time to work his arts and open the gate, allowing the rest of his collective consciousness to return to the world of their creation. He would be whole again.

Then with a mighty bound, Tomas leaped above him sword held with both hands, point downward, and with

all his remaining energies he drove the blade down in one terrible blow. There was an ear-shattering shriek as Draken-Korin arched backward, like a bow being drawn. The golden sword passed through him and into the Lifestone.

Then the wind came. From somewhere a compelling current of air appeared, blowing from all directions into the Lifestone. The mortally stricken Dreadlord trembled at the breeze's touch, then quivered. It suddenly became a thing of smoke and insubstance and was carried along on the wind as it was sucked into the stone. The form of the Lord of Tigers shivered, then shook violently, as a golden glow spread from Tomas's magic blade to engulf Draken-Korin. The golden nimbus began to pulse and Draken-Korin became insubstantial and like the Dreadlord vanished into the stone.

Pug staggered as if from a blow, and the rift was torn open, but not from the other side. It was as if a giant hand had reached out and moved his magic blocks aside, then reached into the rift, pulling something through. Pug felt Macros's mind and recognized that somehow Hochopepa and Elgahar were there as well. Then the rift exploded toward them and they were cast back into normal awareness.

The room shifted about Tomas. Suddenly Macros, Pug, two black-robed men, and Arutha were there.

He looked back and saw Ryath, huddled in the corner, a mass of terrible, smoking wounds. The dragon appeared dead, or if still alive, then only for a short while longer. She had met her destiny as she had foretold, and Tomas vowed she would be remembered. Beyond her recumbent form, the Valheru treasure vault had been torn open in the struggle between dragon and Dreadlord, emptying its contents of gold and gems, books and artifacts, across the floor.

Arutha leaped to his feet and asked, "What has happened?"

"I think it is almost over," Tomas said as he jumped

down.

Macros staggered, and Pug and the others moved, as the sound of shrieking winds became a terrible force buffeting the ears. Suddenly all covered their ears as a terrible concussion sounded, and the very roof of the chamber exploded upward, destroying the very soil above the ancient vault, and the cellars and lower floors of the keep as well, blowing toward the heavens through the now open crater. A geyser of masonry and stone, the fragments of two buildings, were carried high into the

sky, to be strewn outward into the city. High in the air above them an opening, a grey sparkling nothing, appeared against the blue. And from within it, a blaze of many colours could be seen.

Pug, Hochopepa, and Elgahar had all seen such a display once before, each in turn when upon the Tower of Testing in the City of Magicians. It was the vision of the Enemy seen at the time of the golden bridge, when the nations had fled to Kelewan during the Chaos Wars. 'it is coming through!' shouted Hochopepa.

Macros shouted above the terrible howling sound from the gem, 'The Lifestone it's been activated.'

Pug looked about in confusion. 'But we're still alive.'

Tomas pointed to where his golden sword was still stuck upright into the Lifestone. 'I killed Draken-Korin before he could finish utilizing the Lifestone. It is only partly active.'

'What will happen?' shouted Pug over the earshattering noise.

'I don't know.' Macros joined the others in covering his ears. At the top of his lungs he shouted, "We need a force barrier!"

At once Pug knew what was needed and attempted to fashion the magic that would keep them from being destroyed. "Hocho, Elgahar, aid me!"

He began his incantation and the others joined in, to fashion a protective barrier around them. The sound increased to the pitch where Arutha found his hands over his ears did no good, he gritted his teeth in pain., fighting against the urge to scream, wondering if the magicians could finish their incantations. The light from the Lifestone grew in intensity, to a blinding pure white with silver flares about the edge. It seemed ready to unleash some terrible destruction. The Prince was nearly numb from fatigue and the horror of what had occurred in the last few hours. He dully wondered what it would be like for the planet to die. Then he could stand the pain no longer and began to scream. . . as Pug finished the incantation, and the room i exploded.

A ragged trembling commenced in the ground, a rolling surging like an earthquake, and Guy turned to regard the city %The soldiers of Shamata Landreth and the T Dark Brothers but all combat was forgotten as e ow s ca as emotions, ar error an despair had suddenly washed over every living creature, robbing them of any urge to fight. To the last, each wished only to put as much distance as possible between himself and the source of that desperate fear.

Then a low rolling pulse began, a stunning noise of grating, painful quality. All within earshot of the sound

fell to their knees. Men vomited as their stomachs constricted from a horrible sense of directionlessness, as if suddenly the force that held them to the ground vanished. Eyes watered and ears ached as they seemed to rise upward. All felt as if they were floating for an instant, then they were wrenched to the ground, slammed as if struck by a giant hand. Then came the explosion.

Any who were struggling to stand were again thrown down as a light of impossible brilliance shot straight upward. As if the sun had exploded, it hurled shards of stone, earth, and wood skyward, a monstrous upheaval of energies. High above Sethanon, a red sparkle grew, a blinding light that dulled quickly to a point of grey nothingness. There came an unexpected silence, while vortices of energy danced within the greyness. As if the fabric of heaven were being turned back upon itself, the edges of the rent in the sky peeled backward, revealing another universe in the skies. The cascading colours that were the might, the energy, the very~ life of the Dragon Lords, could be seen pulsing and surging forward, as if seeking to pass the last barrier between themselves and their final goal. Then came a sound.

'A silver trumpet note of incredible volume sounded, piercing every being within miles of the city, as if a wind of needles passed through their bodies. The agony of final hopelessness overwhelmed them all.' A thing of despair again sounded through the minds of every creature within sight of Sethanon, as each was suddenly aware their life was somehow tied to what they witnessed. Panic rose up in each observer, even to the most battle-tested soldier, and to a man all wept and cried out, for they were seeing the last moments of their existence. Then all noise ceased.

In the eerie silence, something formed in the blaze of colours in the skies. The grey nothingness had spread outward, until the whole of the heavens seemed blanked out by it, and in the heart of that insane display the Enemy appeared. At first it seemed dull blotches of colour, pulsing and shifting as it pushed itself through the gap between worlds. But as it began to pass through, it began to dissolve into smaller blots of bright colours, shining energy forms that solidified into distinct shapes. Soon all on the ground could see individual beings, manshaped creatures, each mounted upon the back of a dragon, in the heart of the rift. With an explosion surpassing all before, the Dragon Host sprang through the rift in the sky, thundering into the world of their birth. Hundreds of beings, each mystically linked with the others, swept out of the rift, crying ancient battle cries. They were images of terrible beauty, magnificent

beings of astonishing power, in armour of bright colour and splendid form, riding upon the backs of ancient dragons. Incredible beasts, many gone ages from Midkemia, beat gigantic, wings across the heavens. Great black, green, and blue dragons, extinct upon their homeworld, soared beside the gold and bronze creatures whose descendants were still alive. Reds, whose like were common, glided next to silver dragons, unseen in Midkemia in ages. The Valheru's faces were masks of gleeful joy as they seized the moment of victory and savoured it. Each seemed a vessel of unsurpassed power, ruler of all he surveyed. They were power. As they appeared, a pain of nearly unendurable intensity was felt within the body of each creature upon the planet, as if their strand of life was somehow being pulled.

Then at the moment of deepest terror, when all hope seemed abandoned, a force rose upward. From deep within the crater below the keep a surge of energy fountained above the city, twisting in confusion and leaping across the roof-tops. It danced a furious jig in mad abandon as green fire sped outward, pouring like liquid flame into ever-widening circles. Then with a dull thumping sound, loud but not painful to the ears, a gigantic cloud of dust was hurled skyward, and all noise ceased.

Something answered the chaos in the skies. It was unseen but felt, a thing of titanic dimensions, a rejection of all the black and evil despair experienced only moments before. As if all the love and wonders of creation had given voice to a song, it rose to challenge the Dragon Host. A green light, brilliant to match that red light of a moment before, sprang upward from the crater in the ground, to strike at the rift. Those in the van of the Dragon Host were engulfed in green light, and as each was touched, it became a thing of insubstantiality, a wraith of a past epoch, a shadow of an earlier era.

The Dragon Lords became clouds of coloured smoke, beings of mist and memory. They trembled and danced, as if held in thrall by opposing and equal forces, then they were suddenly sucked downward, as if being pulled into the ground by an irresistible wind. The riderless dragons screamed and wheeled, flying furiously away from the wind, now free of their masters' commands.

Toward all points of the compass they dispersed. The earth shook beneath those who watched in stunned wonder, and the sound of that wind was both fearsome and beautiful to hear, as if the gods themselves had composed a death song. Then the tear in the sky vanished in a single instant, with no display, no hint it had existed. The wind ceased.

And the silence was stunning.



Jimmy looked around. He found himself crying, then laughing, then crying. Suddenly he felt as if all the horrors he had known, all the pain he had experienced had been banished. Suddenly he felt right, to the deepest centre of his being. He felt connected with every living thing upon the planet. He felt his being filled with life, and with love. And he knew that, at last, they had won. Somehow at the moment of their triumph, the Valheru had been overcome, had been defeated. The young squire stood upon wobbly legs, laughing in joy as tears fell unashamedly down his face. He found himself with his arm around a Tsurani soldier who also grinned and cried at once.

Guy was helped again to his feet and regarded the scene about him. Goblins, trolls, and Dark Brothers, and an occasional giant, were staggering northward, but no one was yet giving chase. The soldiers of the Kingdom and the Tsurani simply watched the spectacle of the city, for now a dome of impossible green light glowed over Sethanon, a green so bright it was visible in the sunlight of a clear autumn day, and so beautiful it filled all who watched with a wonder of overpowering intensity. A song of awesome joy sounded within the hearts of all who saw the dome, felt rather than heard. At every hand, men wept openly as they regarded something of sublime perfection, filling them with a joy beyond description. The green dome seemed to flicker, but that might have been the result of the dust passing in clouds around it. Guy watched, unable to take his eye from it. Even the goblins and trolls who staggered past were changed, as if drained of any desire to fight.

Guy sighed and felt the joy within begin to lessen, and was visited with the certainty that never again in his life would he know such a perfect moment of joy, such a wondrous rapture. Armand de Seigny came hurrying toward his old ally, Martin and a dwarf a short way behind. 'Guy!' he said, taking the place of one of the Tsurani, holding his former commander and friend upright as he hugged him fiercely. Both men rocked back and forth with arms around each other, laughing and weeping.

Quietly du Bas-Tyra said, "Somehow we've won.'

Armand nodded, then said, "Arutha?'

Guy shook his head sadly. (Nothing could have survived inside that. Nothing.'

Martin and Dolgan arrived at the head of a band of dwarven warriors. The King of the Dwarves of the West came to stand next to Guy and Armand. He spoke quietly. "'Tis a thing of terrible and infinite beauty.' Now the dome of light seemed to take on the appearance of a giant gem, as if composed of hexagonal facets. Each

facet shone brightly but dimmed at a different rate, giving the dome the appearance of sparkling. The feelings of perfection were dimming, as was the surging joy, but still a calm wonder could be felt by all who looked upon it.

Martin tore his eyes from the sight and said, "Arutha?"

Guy said, 'He vanished in there with three men who came by dragon-back. The elf knows their names.'

As the vision before them pulsed, Guy forced his attention back to mundane concerns. "Gods, what a mess. Martin, you'd better have some men chase those Dark Brothers home, before they can re-form and come back.'

Dolgan quietly removed a pipe from his belt pouch.

'My lads are already seeing to that, but they won't 'mind company. Though somehow I don't think the moredhel and their servants will need much urging. Truth is, I doubt any here today have much itch for fighting left.'

Then, outlined against the glowing green sphere, through the dust, came the silhouettes of six men, halfwalking, half-limping. Martin and the others were silent as the six came nearer, each rendered almost featureless by a thick mantle of dust. Then when they were halfway between the city gates and the onlookers, Martin shouted, "Arutha!"

At once men were hurrying forward, to give aid to Arutha and his companions. Each had a pair of soldiers offering to help them walk, but Arutha only halted and embraced his brother. Martin put his arm about his brother's shoulder, crying in open relief at seeing him alive again. After a long moment they separated and turned to regard the glowing dome over the city.

A sudden renewal of the sensation of harmony with all life and love washed over them, a wondrous feeling of sublime perfection. Then it vanished.

The green lights of the dome winked out of existence, and the dust began to settle.

Macros spoke in a hoarse croak. "It's finally over.'

Lyam moved through the camp, inspecting the ragged remains of those who fought at Highcastle and Sethanon.

Arutha walked at his side, still sore and battered from the struggle. The King said, 'This tale is astonishing. I can believe it only because proof lies before my eyes.' Arutha said, 'I lived it and can scarcely believe what I saw.'

Lyam glanced about. 'Still; from everything you've said, we're lucky to be seeing anything at all. I guess we have much to be thankful for.' He sighed. 'You know when we were boys, I'd have sworn being King would be a grand thing.' He looked thoughtfully at Arutha. 'Just

as I would have sworn that I was as smart as you and Martin.' With a rueful smile he said, "The proof that I'm not was that I didn't follow Martin's example and renounce the crown.

"Nothing but messes. I've got Hazara-Khan prowling

about, engaging in chitchat with half the nobles in the Kingdom, and no doubt picking up state secrets like they were seashells on the beach. Now the rift is reopened, I need to communicate with the Emperor and see if I can arrange for a prisoner exchange. Except we don't have any, having made them all free men, so Kasumi and Hokanu tell me we'll probably have to buy the captives back, which means raising taxes. And I've got a hundred or more dragons, some not seen on this world in many ages, flying in every direction, who may land wherever they will - when they get hungry. Then there's the problem of an entire city being ruined -'

Arutha said, "Consider the alternative.'

'But if that isn't enough, you handed me du Bas-Tyra to deal with and, from what you said, he's a hero in the bargain. Half the lords of the Kingdom want me to find a tree and hang him, and the other half are ready to hang me if he tells them to do so.' He regarded his brother with a sceptical eye. 'I think I should have taken a hint when Martin renounced, and dropped the crown on you. Give me a decent pension and I still might.' Arutha's expression turned dark and cloudy at even a hint he would have more responsibility. Lyam looked about as Martin shouted greeting. 'Anyway,' he said to Arutha, "I think I know what I'll do about the last.' Lyam waved to Martin, who hurried over. 'Did you find her?'

The Duke of Crydee grinned. 'Yes, she was with a group of auxiliaries from Tyr--Sog that marched a halfday behind me all the way here, the ones who came along with Kasumi's LaMutians and Dolgan's dwarves.' Lyam had been touring the site of the battle for a day and a half with Arutha, since he had arrived. His army had been the last to reach the battlefield, for winds from Rillanon to Salador had been unfavourable. With a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder, he indicated where the nobles 'of the Kingdom had gathered, near his pavilion. "Well,' he said, "they're all dying to know what we do now.'

and

'Have you decided?' asked Arutha of Martin. The Prince had stayed in council all night with Lyam, Pug, Tomas, Macros, and Laurie - while Martin had combed the camp looking for Briana - discussing the disposition of many matters, now that the threat from Murmandamus

was averted.

Martin looked positively jubilant. "Yes, we're to be married as soon as possible. If there's a priest of any order left among the city refugees, then tomorrow." Lyam said, "I think you'll have to stem your passion long enough for some sort of state wedding." Martin's expression began to cloud over. Lyam burst into laughter. "Hell, now you look just like he does!" and pointed at Arutha. The King was suddenly overcome with a deep affection for his brothers and threw his arms about their necks. Hugging them fiercely, he spoke in a voice thick with emotion. "I'm so proud of you both. I know Father would be." For a long moment the three of them stood with their arms about each other. Brightening his tone, Lyam said, "Come, let us restore some order to our Kingdom. Then we can celebrate. Damn me, but if we don't have a reason, no one ever has." He gave both a playful shove and, with all three laughing, herded them toward his pavilion.

Pug watched as Lyam entered with his brothers. Macros leaned upon his staff beside Kulgan, with the other magicians from Stardock and the Assembly clustered behind. Katala hung on to her husband, as if unwilling to let him go, while William and Gamina clung to his robe. He tousled the girl's hair, pleased to discover he had inherited a daughter in the time he'd been gone. Off to one side, Kasumi spoke quietly with his younger brother. For the first time in three years they were together. Hokanu and the soldiers most loyal to the Emperor had been those sent to aid the Black Robes of the Assembly when they had come. Both brothers of the Shinzawai had been interviewed by Lyam earlier that day, for, as he had said, the return of the rift between worlds had created some difficulties.

Laurie and Barn joined Martin, who kept his arm around Briana's waist. The redheaded warrior called Shigga leaned upon his spear behind them, quietly observing the proceedings, despite his inability to understand what was being said. They had arrived with Briana, as had other survivors of Armengar, marching with the army under Vandros of Yabon. Most of the Armengarian soldiers were out with the dwarves, chasing the host of Murmandamus back north. Next to them Dolgan and Galain watched, the dwarf seeming to have aged not one day. The only indication of his rise to the throne of the western dwarves was the Hammer of Tholin, which hung at his belt. Otherwise he looked exactly as Pug remembered him from the time they had braved the mines under the Grey Tower Mountains. He spied Pug from across the tent and gave him a smile and

wave.

Lyam held up his hand. 'Many things have been told to us since our arrival, wondrous tales of bravery and heroism, narratives of duty and sacrifice. With the upheaval here, some issues become resolved. We have spoken with many of you, taking good counsel, and now we have some proclamations to make. In the first, though the people of the city of Armengar are foreign to our nation, they are brethr'en to our people of Yabon. We welcome them back as brothers returned and offer them a place alongside their kin. They may count themselves as citizens of the Kingdom. If any wish to return to the north, to settle again in that land, we shall aid them in whatever way we may, but we hope they will

stay. 'And we also offer deep thanks to King Dolgan and his followers for their timely aid. I also wish to thank Galain the elf for his willingness to help our brother. And let it be known that our lords the Prince of Krondor and the Dukes of Crydee and Salador have served their Kingdom beyond any measure and the crown is in their debt. No king could ever demand of his subjects what they so freely gave.' Then, in a precedent-making display, Lyam led a cheer for Arutha, Laurie, and Martin. The pavilion rang with the cheers of the assembled nobles. 'Now let Earl Kasumi of LaMut and his brother, Hokanu of the Shinzawai, approach.'

When the two Tsurani had come before him, Lyam said, 'Kasumi, first of all relay to your brother, and through him to the Emperor and his soldiers, our undying gratitude for their generous and valiant efforts in saving this nation from grave peril.' Kasumi began to translate for his brother.

Pug felt a hand upon his shoulder and turned to find Macros inclining his head. Pug kissed Katala and whispered, 'I'll be back shortly.'

Katala nodded and held on to her children, knowing that for once her husband was not just saying that. She watched while Macros took Tomas and Pug away a short distance.

Lyam said, "Now that the way has been opened, we shall permit those of the garrison of LaMut who wish to return to their homeland to do so, freeing them of vassalage to us.'

Kasumi bowed his head. 'My liege, I am pleased to inform you that most of the men have elected to remain, saying that while your generosity overwhelms them, they are now men of the Kingdom, with wives, families, and ties. I shall also remain.'

"We are pleased, Kasumi. We are very pleased.'

The two withdrew and Lyam said, 'Now let Armand de Seigny, Baldwin de la Troville. and Anthony du Masigny come forward.'

The three men came and bowed. Lyam said, "Kneel," and the three men bent knees before their King.

'Anthony du Masigny, you are herewith granted again your titles and lands in the Barony of Cairy, taken from you when you were sent to the north, and add to them the title and lands once held by Baldwin de la Troville. We are pleased with your service. Baldwin de la Troville, we have need of you. As we have given your office of Squire of Marlsbourough to du Masigny, we have another for you. Will you accept the post of commander of our outpost at Highcastle?'

De la Troville said, "Yes, sire, though if it pleases the crown I'd like to winter in the south, now and again.'

From the crowd a laugh answered, as Lyam said, 'Granted, for we shall also grant you the titles formerly held by Armand de Seigny. Rise, Baldwin, Baron of Highcastle and Gyldenholt.' He looked at Armand de Seigny and said, "We have plans for you, my friend. Let the former Duke of Bas-Tyra be brought forth.' Guards in the colours of the King came with Guy du Bas-Tyra, half escorting him, half carrying him from within the King's pavilion, where he had been convalescing with Amos Trask. When Guy halted next to the kneeling Armand, the King said, "Guy du Bas-Tyra, you have been branded traitor and banished, not to return to our nation upon pain of death. We understand you had little choice in the matter of your return.' He cast a glance at Arutha who smiled ruefully. 'We hereby rescind the order of banishment. Now, there is a matter of title. We are giving the office of Duke of Bas-Tyra to the man our brother Arutha has judged most fit for it. Armand de Seigny, we hereby grant unto you the office of Lord of the Duchy of Bas-Tyra, with all rights and obligations pertaining thereunto. Rise, Duke Armand de Seigny.'

Lyam turned his gaze upon Guy. 'Even without your hereditary office, we think we shall still keep you busy. Kneel.' Guy was helped to kneel by Armand. "Guy du Bas-Tyra for your deep concern for the welfare of the Kingdom despite her having cast you out and your bravery in the defence of both Armengar and this Kingdom, we offer to you the office of First Advisor to the King. Will you accept?'

Guy's good eye widened, and then he laughed. 'This is a grand jest, Lyam. Your father's having a fit somewhere. Yes, I'll take it.'

The King shook his head and smiled, remembering his father. "No, we think he understands. Rise, Guy, Duke of Rillanon.'

Next Lyam said, 'Baru of the Hadati.' Baru left Laurie, Martin, and Briana, and knelt before his King. "Your bravery is without peer, both in destroying the

moredhel Murad and in accompanying our brother Martin and Duke Laurie over the mountains to bring us warning of Murmandamus's invasion. We have thought long and hard and are at a loss as to what reward to offer. What may we do to show you our pleasure at your service?'

Baru said, "Majesty, I desire no reward. I have many new kinsmen come into Yabon and would make my home with them, if I may.'

Lyam said, "Then go with our blessings, and should you need anything within our power to grant, to ease the relocation of your kinsmen, you have but to ask.'

Baru rose and returned to stand by his friends, who all smiled. Baru had found a new home and a purpose in life.

Other rewards were given and the business of the court continued. Arutha remained apart, wishing that Anita could be with him, but knowing he was only days away from her. He saw Macros off in the distance, speaking with Pug and Tomas. The three figures stood in shadow, as the day was coming to a close, evening rapidly approaching. Arutha sighed in fatigue and wondered what they were concerned with now.

Macros said, 'Then you understand.'

Pug said, "Yes, but it is still a hard thing.' He didn't need to speak any more. He had full measure of the knowledge gained when he and the sorcerer had been joined. Now he was Macros's equal in power, and almost his equal in knowledge. But he would miss the presence of the sorcerer, now he knew his fate.

'All things come to an end, Pug. Now it is the end of my time upon this world. With the ending of the Valheru presence, my powers have returned fully. I will move on to something new. Gathis will join me, and the others at my island are cared for, so I have no more duties here. I must move onward, just as you must stay here. There will be kings to counsel, little boys to teach, old men to argue with, wars to avoid, wars to be fought.' He sighed as if again he wished for a final release. Then his tone lightened. 'Still, it is never boring. It is never that. Be sure the King knows what we have done here.' He regarded Tomas. The human turned Valheru looked somehow different since the final battle, and Macros spoke softly. 'Tomas, you have the eldar returning home at last, their self-imposed exile in Elvardein at an end. You'll need to aid your Queen in ruling a new Elvandar

Many of the glamredhel will be seeking you out, now that they know Elvandar exists, and you'll also find an increase in Returnings, I think. Now that the influence of the Valheru is confined, the lure of the Dark Path should weaken. At least, we can hope so. Seek inward, as well, Tomas, for I think you'll find much of your power is now gone with those who were Ashen-Shugar's brethren. You still stand with the most powerful of mortals, but I wouldn't seek to master dragons, if I were you. I think they might give you a shock.'

Tomas said, 'I felt myself change . . . at the last.' He had seemed subdued since his battle with Draken-Korin. 'Am I again mortal?'

Macros nodded. "You always were. The power of the Valheru changed you, and that change will not be reversed, but you were never immortal. You were simply close to it. But do not worry, you've retained a great deal of the Valheru heritage. You'll live out a long life beside your Queen, at least as long as any of elvenkind are allotted by fate.' At these words Tomas seemed reassured.

"Keep vigilant, both of you, for the Pantathians spent

centuries planning and executing this deceit. It was a plot of stunning detail. But the powers granted to the one who posed as Murmandamus were no mean set of conjurer's illusions. He was a force. To have created such a one and to have captured and manipulated the hearts of even a race as dark as the moredhel required much. Perhaps without the Valheru influence across the barriers of space and time, the serpent people may become much as others, just another intelligent race among many.' He looked off into the distance. 'Then again, perhaps not. Be wary of them.'

Pug spoke slowly. "Macros . . . at the end I was certain we had lost.'

Macros smiled an enigmatic smile. "So was I. Perhaps the Valheru's manipulation of the Lifestone was prevented from reaching fruition by Tomas's sword stroke. I don't know. The rift was opened, and the Dragon Host allowed to enter, but. . .' The old sorcerer's eyes seemed alight with some deep emotion. "Some wonder or another, beyond my understanding, intervened at the last.' He looked downward. 'it was as if the very stuff of life, the souls of all that lived upon this world, rejected the Valheru. The power of the Lifestone aided us, not them. That was from where I drew strength at the last. It was that which captured the Dragon Host and the Dreadlord and closed the rift. It was that which protected us all, keeping us alive.' He smiled. "You should seek, with care, to learn as much as you can about



the Lifestone. It is a wonder beyond what any of us suspected.'

Macros was silent for a time, then looked at Pug. 'You are as much a son to me, in a strange sort of way, as any I may have called that over the ages. At least you are my heir, and husbander of all the magic lore I have accumulated since coming to Midkemia. That last case of books and scrolls I held at my island will come soon to Stardock. I suggest you hide that fact from Kulgan and Hochopepa, until you've reviewed what's there. Some of it is beyond any on this world but you, and whoever may follow you in our unusual calling. Train those around you well, Pug. Make them powerful, but make them loving, generous men and women as well.' He paused as he looked at the two boys grown to men, those lads from Crydee whom twelve years ago he had begun to mould to save a world and more. At last he said, "I have used both of you, ungently at times. But in the end it proved necessary. Whatever pain you may have endured is, I like to think, offset by the gains. You have achieved things beyond your boyhood dreams. You are now the caretakers of Midkemia. You have whatever blessing I may give.' With an unusual catch in his voice, his eyes moist and glowing, he softly said, "Good-bye and thank you.' He stepped away from them, then slowly turned. Neither Pug nor Tomas could bring himself to say goodbye.

Macros began walking toward the west, into the sunset. Not only did he move away from them, but with the first step he seemed somehow to become less solid. With each additional step he became more insubstantial, transparent, and soon he was like mist, then less than the mist. Then he was gone.

They watched him go, saying nothing for a while. Then Tomas wondered, "Will he ever know peace, do you think?'

Pug said, "I don't know. Perhaps someday he'll find his Blessed Isle.'

They were again silent for a time. Then they returned to the King's Pavilion.

There was a celebration in full swing. Martin and Briana had announced their plans to wed, to the obvious approval of everyone. Now, while others revelled in life and survival and the simple joy of living, Arutha, Lyam, Tomas, and Pug picked their way through the rubble that was Sethanon. The populace was housed in the less damaged western section, but they were only a distant presence. Still they moved cautiously, lest anyone observe them.

Tomas led them through a large crack in the ground, to what appeared a cave opening below the rubble of the

keep. "Here,' said Tomas, "a fissure has opened, leading down to the lower chamber, the centre of the ancient city. Step carefully.'

Slowly they descended, seeing by a dim light of Pug's magic arts, and soon they entered the chamber. Pug waved his hand and a brighter light sprang forth. Tomas motioned the King forward. Figures in robes stepped out of the shadows, and Arutha drew his sword.

A woman's voice came from the dark. 'Put up your sword, Prince of the Kingdom.'

Tomas nodded and Arutha resheathed his mystic blade. From out of the dark came an enormous figure, bejewelled and brilliant as light danced across a myriad of facets. It was a dragon, but none like any seen, for in place of scales once golden a thousand gemstones gleamed. With each movement, a rainbow of dazzling beauty washed over the monstrous form.

'Who are you?' asked the King calmly.

'I am the Oracle of Aal,' came the soft voice from the Dragon's mouth.

'We struck a bargain,' said Pug. "We needed to find her a proper body.'

Tomas said, 'Ryath was rendered mindless, her soul gone at the hands of the Dreadlord. Her body still lived, though damaged severely and hovering close to death. Macros healed her, replacing the destroyed scales with new ones fashioned from the gems of the treasure hidden here, using some unique property of the Lifestone. With his restored arts he brought the Oracle and her servants here. Now the Oracle lives within the emptied mind.' it is a more than satisfactory body,' said the Oracle.

'it will live for many centuries. And it possesses many powers.'

"And,' added Pug, "she will remain forever vigilant

over the Lifestone. For if any were to tamper with it, she would perish along with everyone else upon the planet. Until we find a way to seek out and deal with the Pantathians, the risk still exists that the Valheru could be recalled.'

Lyam regarded the Lifestone. The pale green gem glowed softly, seeming to pulse with a warm inner light. And from its centre a golden sword protruded. "We do not know if this destroyed the Dragon Lords or merely holds them in thrall,' said Pug. "Even the magics I learned from Macros may not penetrate all its mysteries. We are fearful of removing Tomas's sword, for to do so might cause no harm at all or it might unleash what is 'trapped within.'

Lyam shuddered. Of all he had heard, the power of

the Lifestone had made him feel the most helpless. He approached it and slowly put forth his hand. The stone proved warm to the touch and contact filled him with a mild, relaxing pleasure. There was a sense of rightness in the stone. The King faced the mighty form of the bejewelled dragon. "I have no objection to your stewardship, lady.' He thought, then spoke to Arutha. "Start some rumour that the city's now cursed. Slave little Humphry's dead, and there's no heir to his title. I'll move what's left of the populace and pay them indemnity. The city's more than half destroyed already. Let's empty it out, and the Oracle will remain undisturbed. Let us leave, lest we are missed at revel and someone comes seeking after us.' To the dragon he said, "Lady, I wish you well in your office. Should you have

any need, send a message, by means magic or mundane, and I shall seek to meet it. Only we four, and my brother Martin, shall know the truth of you, and from this time forward, only our heirs.'

"You are gracious, Majesty,' answered the Oracle.

Tomas led them out of the cavern, and upward, to the surface.

Arutha entered his tent, and was startled to find Jimmy sleeping in his bed. He shook him gently. "What is this? I thought you were given quarters?'

Jimmy looked at the Prince with an ill-concealed grumpiness at being awakened. 'it's Locky. The whole damn city's coming down about our ears and he finds another girl. It's getting to be a habit. Last night I slept on the ground. I just thought to catch a nap. I'll find another place.'

Arutha laughed and pushed the youngster back into the Bed as he began to rise. 'Stay here. I'll bunk in the King's Pavilion. Lyam was busy handing out rewards this evening, while you slumbered and Locky . . . well, did whatever he was doing. In all the confusion I overlooked you two. What should I do to reward you scoundrels.'

Jimmy grinned. "Make Locky Senior Squire so I can go back to the quiet life of a thief.' He yawned. 'Right now, I can't think of a damn thing I want except a week of sleep.'

Arutha smiled. "All right. Get some sleep. I'll come up with something for you young rogues.' He left Jimmy and made his way back toward Lyam's tent.

As he approached the entrance, a shout of announcement and a trumpet flourish accompanied the arrival of a dusty carriage bearing the royal crest. Anita and Carline quickly stepped out. Arutha showed astonishment as his

wife and sister rushed forward to hug and kiss him.  
"What's this?"

'We followed Lyam,' said a tearful Anita. 'We couldn't wait in Rillanon to find out if you and Laurie were alive. As soon as messages reached us you were well, we broke camp and hurried here.'

Arutha hugged her as Carline listened to singing a moment and said, 'Either that's a nightingale in love, or my husband is forgetting he's now a duke.' She kissed Arutha once more on the cheek and said, "You're going to be an uncle again.'

Arutha laughed and hugged his sister. "Much love and happiness, Carline. Yes, that's Laurie. He and Baru arrived today with Vandro's."

She smiled. "Well, I think I'll go give him some grey hairs.'

Arutha said, "What does she mean "again?"

Anita looked up into her husband's face. "The Queen is with child - the announcement was made while you were gone - and Father Tully sends word to Lyam that it seems all signs indicate a prince. Tully claims he's too old for the road now. But his prayers have been with you.'

Arutha grinned. 'So I can be done with being Heir soon.'

'Not too soon, the baby won't be here for another four months.'

A cheer from within told them Carline had passed along the news of her own pregnancy to her husband, and another cheer said that Tully's message had been given as well.

Anita hugged her husband and whispered, "Your sons are well and getting big. They miss their father, as I have done. Can we slip away soon?"

Arutha laughed. 'As soon as we make an appearance. But I've had to give my quarters to Jimmy. It seems Locky's developed an amorous nature and Jimmy had nowhere else to sleep. So we'll have to use one of the guest tents in this pavilion.' He walked inside with his wife, and the assembled nobles rose in greeting to the Prince and Princess of Krondor.

The Keshian Ambassador, Lord Hazara-Khan, bowed, and Arutha extended his hand. 'Thank you, Abdur.' He introduced Anita to Hokanu and again repeated thanks. Dolgan was speaking with Galain, and Arutha congratulated the dwarf on his assumption of the crown of the western dwarves. Dolgan threw him a wink and a smile, then they all fell silent as Laurie began to play.

They listened closely while Laurie sang, it was a sad song, yet brave, a ballad he had composed in honour of

his friend Roald. It spoke of Laurie's sorrow at his passing, but it ended on a major chord, a note of triumph, then a silly little coda that made all who knew Roald laugh, for it somehow captured his raffish nature. Then Cardan and Volney came up and the Earl of Landreth said, "If we may have a brief word with you, Highness."

Anita indicated she didn't mind, and Arutha let the two men who had ruled in his absence lead him into the room next to the King's chamber. A bulky figure lay upon the bed, breathing heavily, and Arutha raised his fingers to his lips, indicating quiet.

Cardan craned his neck and whispered, "Amos Trask?" Arutha said softly, "It's a very long story, and I'll let him tell it. He'd never forgive me if I didn't. Now, what is it?"

In a low voice, Volney said, 'Highness, I want to return to Landreth. With your supposed death, the city's been a rats' warren to administer. I've done my best for the last three years, but this is enough. I want to go home.'

Arutha said, 'I can't spare you, Volney.' The stout Earl's voice started to rise, and Arutha hushed him. "Look, there's going to be a new Prince of Krondor soon,

so we'll need a Principate Regent.'

Volney said, "That's impossible. That's an eighteen year commitment. I refuse.'

Arutha looked at Cardan, who grinned and held up his hands. 'Don't look at me. Lyam promised me I could return to Crydee with Martin and his lady. With Charles the new Swordmaster, I can leave the soldiering to my son. I plan on spending my days fishing off the breakwater at Longpoint. You're going to need a new Knight-Marshal soon.'

Arutha swore. "That means if I don't find someone soon, Lyam's going to name me Duke of Krondor and Knight-Marshal both. I am going to try to get him to give me some quiet Earldom, like Tuckshill, and never leave home again.' He thought hard and silently, then said, 'I want ten more years, from both of you.'

(Absolutely not!' said Volney. The stout noble's voice rose in indignation. "I'm willing to stay one year, to aid any transition in administration, but no more.'

Arutha's eyes narrowed. 'Six, six more years from each of you. If you agree, you can retire to Landreth, Volney, and you to Crydee, Cardan. If not, I'll find some way to drag you off to nothing but trouble.'

Cardan laughed. "I have Lyam's permission already Arutha.' Seeing the Prince's anger growing, he said, 'But if Volney stays, I'll also stay on a year - all

right, two, but no more, until you get things under control.'

"An almost evil' light entered Arutha's' eyes. To 'Cardan he said, "We're going to need a new ambassador to the Tsurani court, now that the rift is again opened,' and to Volney, 'and we'll need another ambassador to Great Kesh.'

Both men exchanged glances and Volney said, in a harsh whisper, 'All right, blackmailer, three years. What are we going to do for three years?'

Arutha smiled his crooked smile. 'I want you to take Jimmy and Locky's training in hand, personally, Volney. You teach them everything about administration you can. Pile the work on until they're ready to drop, then give them more. I want those overactive minds turned to good use. Make them the best administrators you can.

'Cardan, when they're not in the office, learning how to govern, turn them into soldiers. That young bandit asked for a reward a year ago, and now he's got to show me if he really is a match for that request. And his young partner in crime has too much talent to let him go back to Land's End. Locky's the youngest son, so he'd simply go to waste there. With you two gone, we're going to need a new Duke and Knight-Marshal and, with me gone as well, he's going to be acting as Principate Regent, he'll need an able Chancellor to help him shoulder the burdens of office. So I don't want either of them to have five loose minutes in the next four years.'

"Four years!" shouted Volney, 'I said three!'

Then from the bed came a chuckle and a sigh as Amos said, 'Arutha. you have an odd idea of reward. Whatever gave you such a nasty turn of mind?'

Arutha grinned openly as he said, 'Get some rest, Admiral.'

Amos fell back heavily on the bunk. "Ah, Arutha, you still take all the fun out of life.'