

Prologue
Night Wings

She sleeps, and as so often, dreams of flight.

First comes the unfolding. She seems to open outward from herself, like a piece of paper folded to a small packet, expanding, becoming greater, becoming other, in a way she cannot comprehend.

A moment poised between exaltation and uncertainty, and then she flies, rising into a sky full of stars, her wingbeats sure as a swimmer's strokes. High, and higher she rises, until the narrow grimy streets and alleys, the city itself, are no more than shabby toys beneath her. Beyond its walls stretches the level countryside, black and silver and soft in starlight.

She soars above neat peasant cots, their fields and orchards laid out with mathematical precision like symbols on a wizard's scroll. Over stream and keep and sleeping herd she passes, high and silent and unseen.

She knows two feelings strange to her in waking life: freedom and power. She can fly where she pleases, and no one can say her nay—and she senses, somehow, that her power goes beyond the ability to burst gravity's bonds. The sensations fill her with an almost terrible exhilaration.

Yet even as she begins to realize and exult in those unfamiliar feelings, she is gripped by an awful unseen power that cancels both. Down she is drawn, and down, helpless now, plummeting into a black chasm that yawns in the earth itself, into a pit filled with darkness, the impression of waving tentacles blacker than despair, and a multitude of red-glowing eyes. A voice from below whispers sibilant obscenities in her ears.

She screams, but her screams are as futile as her struggle and, screaming, she falls. . . .

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The jarring impact to her ribs came like salvation.

"Up, Scab," the stable owner said. "You were riding abroad on night's mare, and your caterwauling riled me steeds. Up now; time to be feeding, anyhow."

She nodded, not trusting her voice. The stable owner turned and shuffled off, dragging a foot lamed in some forgotten skirmish. The land of Tethyr was plentifully supplied with those.

She felt her ribs through the dirty, ragged smock she wore. No damage done; the kick had not been that hard. The stable owner was no brutal man, nor even a hard one, intentionally. But he had been raised to hard times, and hard ways, and knew none other.

At least he didn't try to become familiar with her. She was overyoung, by Tethyrian standards, though not everyone was deterred by the fact. Likely as not, he didn't realize she was female. Her face was generally obscured beneath grime and matted masses of dark red hair, and there was nothing of her rag-wrapped scarecrow frame to suggest that she was a girl in her early teens rather than a boy.

There was a handspan of open space between the brick walls of the stable and the eaves, to allow air to circulate in the stifling Zazesspurian summer. The slice of sky she could see had gone dawning purple, stained with the faintest of pinks. A night bird fluttered past the opening, or perhaps a bat, returning to its roost to sleep the day away. She felt a twinge of fear and long-

ing.

The tasks she must perform in return for a few crusts of bread and lodging in a vacant stall were not demanding: she must feed and water the horses, muck their stalls, brush them and comb their manes. Then she would be on her own through the heart of the day, free—as free as she got in waking hours—to continue her search for some wizard to accept her offer of apprenticeship.

If my reputation hasn't spread too far.

She picked herself up and felt her side again. The soreness was fading quickly. The hunger pangs that gnawed her every waking hour like a rat in her belly were already stronger. She tottered off to the pump between stalls redolent of horse-sweat and hay and manure, on legs that seemed to have atrophied from dreams of flight.

Part I
Astronomy Domine

The golden mare tossed her long white mane and said, "I sense trouble ahead, Randi Star."

The woman who sat astride her in a high-cantled Calimshite saddle frowned. "Of course you do," she said. "We're about to enter Tethyr. And don't call me 'Randi.' It's far too young a name for me."

The mare flared her nostrils and produced a ladylike snort. The slow sound of her hooves rebounded from natural walls of dark granite, lichen-splashed and forbidding, so high that, although it was midmorning, the day's first sunlight had yet to spill farther than halfway down them. Playing around their ears like schools of fish were the hoofbeats of burden beasts and outriders' mounts, the jingle-jangle of harnesses, the calls of the muleteers, all muted as the caravan wound through the secret pass across the Snowflake Mountains.

They were bound for Zazesspur on the Sword Coast, a city of fabled wealth and intrigue; the years of troubles had, in truth, little scratched its wealth and done nothing at all to diminish its intrigues. The caravan's hundred mules were laden with luxury goods, wizardry supplies of nonmagical nature, and specialty items for Zazesspur's demanding craftsmen, but the core of the profit Zaranda planned to realize on this expedition was a handful of rare and immensely potent magic objects.

At that, the caravan and its riches—deceptively great for its size and unassuming appearance—were merely a facet of Zaranda Star's complex scheme to retire her debts, and then just retire.

The mare, whose name was Golden Dawn, abruptly twitched her long, well-shaped ears and laid them back along her neck. From behind, one set of hoof noises detached itself from the rest and grew louder.

"Behave, Goldie," Zaranda hissed under her breath.

"Our fat father needs to wash his ass," the mare replied quietly. "The bandy-legged little brute stinks abominably."

"I think Father Pelletyr regards the smell as something of a penance."

"The best kind," the mare said. "That which doesn't interfere with stuffing his belly."

The ass in question drew alongside, trotting to keep up with the longer-legged mare's walking stride. Zaranda Star twitched a nose that, while still long and fine, had been broken once in the past, and reset ever so slightly askew. The beast's rank smell made itself apparent even over sun-heated rock and the stink of man- and beast-sweat, leather and weapon-oil from the caravan behind. In truth, the priest's mount could have been kept cleaner. But the father had a wondrous way with healing magics, and for one in Zaranda's line of business, that counted for much.

"Ah, Zaranda, child," said the priest. "How much farther through these beastly mountains, do you think?"

She laughed. She had a good laugh, and strong, white teeth to laugh with, though she often thought her lips were on the thin side. There were even those who had thought them cruel, but most such had been ill-intentioned to start with.

"Many hard years have passed since I've been a child, Father," she said. "And in answer to your question, not much farther at all."

"That's good to hear. The men and beasts are suffering in this heat." In

truth, the day's heat had filled the chasm much more quickly than its light had.

"You're suffering, you mean," Goldie said. "You'd be best advised to go easy on the elf-bread, Father."

She gave him a meaningful sidelong look. The father was a man of substance, much of which was rhythmically jiggling inside a threadbare gray robe. He had a big florid face with a prominent nose and white hair radiating like the petals of half a sunflower from around the ample tonsure Nature had granted him, atop which was perched a gray skullcap, now mottled with sweat. A golden pendant bearing the bound-hands symbol of Ilmater hung around his neck by a strand of thumb-thick duskwood beads.

He made a mournful face. "Ah," he said, "surely such a noble beast as yourself would not begrudge a mendicant servant of Ilmater the modest pleasures of his table?" He had never entirely adjusted to the idea of conversing with an apparently normal mare, but then Faerun was a realm of wonder, and Ilmater a tolerant god.

"Of course not," Goldie said in a honeyed tone that instantly made Zaranda's eyes narrow. "But still, I cannot help thinking of the burden on your poor mount's legs."

Father Pelletyr's face collapsed like a soufflé in an oven around which an ettin has just commenced a drunken clog dance. He began to fiddle with his beads and cast guilty downward looks at his ass. In so doing he neglected to keep switching at her flanks with the little fir bough he carried for the purpose, and the beast fell behind the longer-legged mare.

"Goldie!" Zaranda said *sotto voce*. "Now you've made the poor man feel guilty."

"Can I help it if he's oversensitive?"

The priest caught them up again. The trail had begun to wend downward. Ahead, it bent right, around a knee of granite with a twisted scrub-cedar perched on its top.

"Was it really needful," he asked in mournful tones, "to take such a strange and circuitous route? Surely there are easier roads into Tethyr."

It was a fair question. The secret path through the mountains had been rife with precipices and rockslides. At a higher elevation, an avalanche had swept two mules and their packs away, but no men had been lost, and the loss of goods had been minimal. Withal, the mountain crossing had been much easier than what Zaranda and her companions had gone through to *get* the most valuable of the goods they carried.

"Surely there are," she replied, "and in consequence they're better attended by bandits and marauders of every stripe. I'm a merchant, Father. Trading away danger for discomfort strikes me as a favorable bargain."

"But surely—oh, dear."

This last was directed down the trail. Zaranda and the Ilmater priest had come around the granite knee to where they could see the end of the narrow defile, opening onto foothills rolling quickly away to the flat green landscape of Tethyr.

The way was blocked by heaps of boulders, one to each side, and between them a dead fir sapling lay across the path as a barricade. Behind the barrier several polearms could be seen waving tentatively, like metal-tipped branches.

"Oh, no," Goldie said. "Not another adventure."

Reins and fir branch alike dropped from Father Pelletyr's hands. Like most of Ilmater's ilk, he was no fighting priest. With plump fingers, he began to fumble at his medallion.

"O Holy Ilmater, O Crying God, Succorer of Tyr the Blinded God, who suffered for us upon the rack, friend to the oppressed, aid us your children now—"

From behind his little ass came the crunch of weighty hooves on granite pebbles. The little beast scrambled to the side of the path with an agility that belied its burden to avoid being shouldered out of the way by a rangy blood-bay gelding.

The gelding's rider, like the horse itself, was tall and spare, with long muscles that seemed to have been carved of oak and weathered dark. He wore a leather tunic laced up the front with a rawhide thong, trousers of muted leaf-green, knee-high boots of soft doeskin with fringed tops turned down. Across his back was slung a quiver and a strung longbow. His right forearm was encased in a leather armlet. Guiding his horse with his knees, the tall man touched the priest's arm gently with his left hand, while his right traced the elven signs for *Bide, Father*. Father Pelletyr nodded, swallowed, and interrupted his prayer. The newcomer gave him a grim smile.

It was the only kind of smile he was equipped for. He was handsome in a heavy-browed, brooding way, with long black hair bound at his nape, a broad jaw shadowed with stubble the sharpest razor could prune but never clear, brown eyes dark as the woods around the Standing Stone of the Dalelands. He carried the twin messages of serenity and menace.

With the silent man at her elbow, Zaranda rode to the barricade and stopped. Goldie tossed her head and danced a bit to let her rider know she was not happy. Ignoring her, Zaranda dismounted and strode forward, glad of the chance to stretch her long legs; unlike most folk who, like Father Pelletyr, favored their ease, Zaranda preferred to be in motion, working the muscles of her lithe, pantherish body. The tall dark man followed, unslinging his longbow.

Zaranda stopped ten feet shy of the abatis and stood to her full height, which was considerable—greater than that of most human men of Faerun. The wind off the Tethyr plains stirred in her hair, which was dark, a brown that was almost black save for a blaze of white over her right brow. It was a heavy, unruly mane, currently caught up in a simple bun in back and hanging square-cut before. The white hairs of the blaze refused to be tamed and tended to stand up in a lick. She had a long-boned athletic frame that spoke of power, grace, and resilience, much in the way of the yew longbow her ranger companion carried.

Her face she would have called handsome and most others beautiful despite the broken nose. Her beauty was of the worn sort that resulted from seeing more of the world than was good for her.

For a span of heartbeats she simply stood. From behind the barrier came a twitter of small voices.

With a certain ostentation, she adjusted the saber she wore across her back, hilt projecting above her right shoulder for easy access, then dropped hands to hips. At last she deigned to speak.

"Who dares impede the return of the Countess Morninggold to her home?" she called in a clear voice.

The whispering from beyond the barricade rose to a crescendo. A

commotion came from the branches of the tree, and with a certain amount of crackling and rustling, a small figure appeared, crawling between dead branches. Once clear it paused to haul forth a glaive-guisarme fully thrice its own length, then hopped erect with more swagger than conviction to confront Zaranda.

"We represent an autonomous collective of demi-humans of diminutive stature," the apparition announced in the deepest voice it could muster. It was a halfling male, no more than three feet tall, wearing a morion helmet easily three sizes too large and a brigandine corselet that came down almost to the hair on the tops of his feet. "We demand toll of all who would pass this way."

The morion spoiled the effect by slipping abruptly down, covering his face to his snub nose. Goldie pawed the earth and whickered laughter. The halfling pushed up the helmet and looked aggrieved.

A half dozen other halflings had clambered up in the branches on the abatis's far side, or onto the piles of boulders, to observe the proceedings from relative safety. Like the spokesman, they were all got up in a parody of brigands.

"Do you maintain this road?" Zaranda asked.

Carefully holding his helmet in place, the halfling blinked innocent blue eyes at her. "No," he admitted.

"Then by what right do you demand toll?"

This provoked another flurry of conversation in the piping halfling tongue instead of the accented Common the spokesman used with Zaranda; though most humanoids in Tethyr spoke Common, few would consent to do so without a heavy dose of regional or racial accent, to prove they weren't *that* familiar with it. Zaranda had a smattering of Halfling, and could have followed the conversation had she chosen to do so.

"Because we're an autonomous collective," one of the onlookers finally said. The spokesman turned back to her with renewed purpose.

"Because we're an autonomous collective," he said.

"So?" Goldie asked.

The halfling goggled at her. "It talks!"

"Bites, too." Goldie stretched her fine arched neck and with a considerable display of teeth pulled up a clump of tough trail grass. "Best mind your manners," she added, munching significantly.

Zaranda noted that the watchers in the gallery kept casting covert glances to the sheer heights above; the cliffs dropped a hundred sheer feet before they gave way abruptly to foothills.

One of the spectators, clearly dissatisfied with the spokesman's polemical talents, called out, "This road belongs to the people."

Zaranda flashed a smile. It was a smile with considerable flash to it, too, which smoothed away the years and the cares and made her seem a maiden girl again. When she wasn't angry.

"Just so," she said. "And we're people, aren't we?"

The halflings blinked at her.

From behind strode, or rather waddled, Father Pelletyr. Even a noncombatant clerk of Ilmater had a hard time taking this lot as a serious threat. All the same, he held his holy symbol prominently out before him. Halflings were reputed to have a wicked way with stones of the slung or flung varieties.

"Let us remain calm, my children," he said in a sonorous and only ever-so-slightly quavering voice. Zaranda had to remind herself that in fiend-haunted Thay of the Red Wizards, not so very long before, she had seen this man face rank upon rank of ghouls and animated skeletons without flinching, and make mighty specters flee his wrath. The father was a man of enormous and sincere piety, and, well, death to the undead. It was living threats he could use some stiffening on. "Surely we can settle this matter in amicable wise."

"Surely we can, Father," Zaranda said.

"Pay us!" several halflings offered helpfully.

"And while it goes against my principles as a merchant to pay tribute to casual banditti on the high road, I was about to ask my comrade-in-arms, here, to provide an entertainment to our hosts. Stillhawk?"

Quick as thought, the dark man had an arrow from his quiver and nocked. He aimed his longbow skyward, scarcely drew back the strength. Yet when he released, the shaft shot a good two hundred yards straight up toward the puffy white cumulus mounds overhead.

When it reached the top of its trajectory and fell sideways to begin its return to earth, Stillhawk's second shot struck its shaft in the middle and transfixed it. The conjoined arrows fell to ground not a score of feet from Zaranda.

The halflings goggled. "Is that not an elven bow?" one asked in wonder.

"That is indeed an elven bow," Zaranda replied. Stillhawk walked over to retrieve his arrows. His soft-booted feet scarce made impressions on the earth. "Made for him by the elves of the Elven Woods, who raised him and taught him archery."

The dark man plucked the razor-edged broad head from the shaft, licked the ash-wood arrow lightly, and ran a scarred thumb across it. When it passed the arrowhead, the split shaft was mended.

"And sundry minor magics as well," Zaranda added. "Kindly forgive my answering for him. He cannot speak; an orcish raiding party cut out his tongue when he was a boy."

Stillhawk nodded in satisfaction and returned both arrows to his quiver. The halflings made *ooing* sounds.

"Wasn't that nice?" Father Pelletyr said, beaming. "Now, if you splendid little fellows could pull this tree aside—"

The spokesman began to sidle and roll his eyes at the heights. "Well, with all respect due a man of the cloth, Father, it ain't perhaps so simple as that. No, not at all."

Zaranda stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

Something arced out from the top of the cliff, something round and initially dark against the clouds. It showed a glint of metal in the sun as it fell, rebounded from a rock with a clang, and rolled until it almost touched the tips of the spokesman's hairy toes.

It was a helmet. He gaped at it in dismay.

"Don't fear, my friend," Zaranda said. "Your comrade's head is not within. Your fellows above are as safe as if they were home hiding behind their mothers' skirts. But they won't be pelting us with boulders from above."

The halflings stared upward. A figure appeared, leaning precariously out over the rim, and gave them a jaunty wave of his hat.

"Permit me to introduce the noted bard Farlorn Half-Elven," Zaranda said. "A man whose skills go quite beyond his gift for the making and playing of

songs. Now, if you'd be so kind as to remove this barrier, gentlefolk, you and ourselves might be about our respective businesses in peace."

"It is a long and dusty road we ride, Zaranda," Father Pelletyr said. "Surely a more direct route to Zazesspur might be found?"

The dust was more metaphorical than real. It was the month of Mirtul, called the Melting, with the feast of Greengrass a few days past. Despite that, and the fact that snow still glittered like silver plate on the highest of the peaks behind them, most of spring's runoff had flowed into the flat Tethyr lowlands a fortnight since. This far south, the climate was temperate, with mild seasonal variations. Tethyr was an "Empire of the Sand" by courtesy of the overworked imagination of northern cartographers influenced by the Calim Desert to the south. The grass was green, and rain had touched the land recently enough to lay the dust, and long enough ago that mud was blessedly absent.

"Indeed, Father," Zaranda replied, "but in Tethyr the most direct route is not always the quickest."

"And there's truth for you," added Farlorn Half-Elven, who rode near Zaranda on his dappled gray mare. "Tethyr's a land of anarchy. No one rules, since the royal family was destroyed years ago."

"Rather, I'd say Tethyr suffers a surfeit of rule," Zaranda said. "Behind every hedgerow lurks a would-be duke or baron, each determined to enforce his will on whomever he can catch—and his taxes too."

"Our circumspection availed us little, sneaking through that secret pass in the Snowflake Mountains, if one so humble may be forgiven for pointing out the fact."

Farlorn put back his head and laughed. His laughter had a pealing edge, like a golden bell ringing. He was a bit over average height, slim and supple as the rapier he wore at his belt. His hair was black and wavy. In his features the admixture of human blood had created not coarsening but leavening of a sort; the literally inhuman beauty of the elven-kind was softened, mitigated, rendered more accessible, more *mortal*. Instead of being forbidding, his good looks were almost magically appealing, at least to most human women he encountered—and not a few elfin women had been known to agree.

He was that rarest of rarities, a wild elf-human hybrid. His features were as dark as Stillhawk's, but with a faint greenish cast, like patina on copper. When he laughed, his teeth flashed like silver mirrors.

"Do you truly think, Father," he asked, "that those poor foolish halflings were as great a danger as we might have faced? Indeed, they had even mislaid the pry bar intended to lever their boulders down upon your heads, and were all crowded together at the cliff edge on hands and knees, rapt with the spectacle. 'Twas child's play to take them unawares."

"Mountains are trickish places," Father Pelletyr said with a touch of petulance. "Who knows but that we might have blundered into a hill giant or a manticore, straying so far from the beaten path?"

"Such things are predators," said Zaranda absently. "They stay close to where prey's most readily found—as their human kindred do."

She was riding along in a reverie, trusting Goldie to make her way on her own. The mare often made resentful noises about her occupation as a mount, but actually displayed great pride in her craft. The caravan was meandering along a trail that was no more than two parallel ruts left by generations of wagon wheels, vaguely following a sluggish creek toward its eventual meeting

with the Shining Stream. The sun had fallen low along their back trail and seemed poised to plunge into the jagged if not particularly lofty Snowflakes, still prominent behind them.

They were in a broad, shallow valley. Late sunlight ran like honey along the high places and brought young plants, wheat and barley and oats, to illusory bloom; the year's second crop had already begun to sprout. The water-smell and the aroma of good, rich bottom soil rose about them like a pleasant haze, with only the occasional whine of a mosquito to break the serenity.

"The good father is surely not complaining of the hardships of the trail?" Farlorn asked in a honeyed voice.

"Indeed not!" Pelletyr replied indignantly. "I think only of the welfare of our men and beasts, who have fared many a long and weary mile today—though certainly the gods gave us beasts to bear our burdens and will not be displeased to see us using them in this wise." This last was directed to Goldie, who had quite forgotten teasing him earlier in the day, and paid him no mind.

The valley turned due east. As they came around the bend, they saw what appeared to be a golden beacon shining from the top of a hill perhaps half a mile ahead. A moment, and they saw it was the lofty keep of a castle or manor house, catching the light of the setting sun.

"It's beautiful!" Father Pelletyr exclaimed.

"It is my home," Zaranda Star said.

They turned off on a track that led between fields of rich grass. White and red-brown cows grazed with calves nuzzling their flanks. A skinny youth dressed in a simple homespun smock stood up and waved, a gesture that roused Zaranda to smile and wave in return.

The boy clutched a staff-sling with his other hand.

"It grieves me to see one so young go armed," the priest said.

"Maybe you'd rather he try to reason with the wargs," Goldie said.

"Perchance a risky tendency to encourage in one's vassals," Farlorn said. "Especially in a land as given to anarchy as Tethyr."

"No vassals in my valley," Zaranda said. "There are only freeholders, and employees on my estate proper, which we've entered. When I bought the county, after the Tuigan incursion, I made pact with the peasants that they should buy the land they worked, paying in installments." As I myself am paying for the county, she thought with something of a twinge.

Being finally shut of the burden of payments for her holding was a major goad that had driven her into this risky enterprise. The system had actually worked to her benefit, since she was still making hefty payments on Morninggold herself. She had had a very successful campaign against the nomads, but the booty she'd gained had gone only so far.

The priest sniffed. "That seems rather a radical notion, and subversive of the social order."

Zaranda wants her people to be allies rather than adversaries, signed Stillhawk, who had ridden with her to the Tuigan War.

As they approached, the manor of Morninggold took on more detail. It was more fortified house than castle, lacking a surrounding wall or moat: a large, rambling structure of two stories here, three there. The walls were stoutly built of dressed granite from the Snowflakes, the roofs pitched and covered in half-cylindrical red tiles. It showed signs of having been built for defensibility, remodeled for leisure, and then subtly returned to its original purpose. Arched

outlines of different-colored stone showed where broad windows on the ground floor had been filled in and replaced by long horizontal windows set above the level of a tall man's head and too narrow to admit even a halfling thief. These were interspersed with arrow loops. The rosebushes budding out beneath the remaining windows were meticulously tended—and their thorns served to further deter intruders. A few outbuildings, likewise stout stone, clustered around the main structure, and a vegetable garden nestled by its flank.

From the back of Castle Morninggold rose the keep that they had seen from a distance. It was tall and round and built of some tawny fieldstone that the waning sunlight turned to pure gold. Networks of ivy clung to its lower reaches. The smooth rounded stones gave off an indefinable air of antiquity, leaving no doubt that the keep had been here long before the rest of the house—and likely would remain long after.

Stablehands emerged with welcoming shouts as the party rode into the yard. Zaranda greeted them by name, inquiring after health and families. Golden Dawn, Stillhawk's bay, Farlorn's gray, and the little donkey were led off to the stables. Goldie issued a stream of instructions as to her care, which the stable-boy who held her halter ignored with an air of practice. The dozen armed escorts dismounted and began to tend their own mounts while the muleteers unloaded the packs from their beasts, preparatory to turning them out to pasture for the night. Zaranda led her three companions up the flagged path to the arched front door.

Before they reached it the door swung open. "Holy Father Ilmater!" Father Pelletyr cried, clutching his holy symbol. Farlorn's rapier hissed free of its scabbard.

The doorway was filled by the bulk of a bugbear. It opened its mouth in a terrible fanged smile and stretched forth black-nailed hands.

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As was customary, Zaranda Star came next-to-last to supper. The good father arrived first in the great hall, with fire laid but not lit in a hearth three heroes could stand abreast and upright in. As a servant of Ilmater, it behooved Pelletyr to be punctual—and it was, well, supper. Next came Vander Stillhawk. The dark, silent man had a ranger's distaste for clocks and timetables and schedules, but he likewise had a knack of being at the proper place at the proper time.

At the very stroke of the eighth hour after noon came Zaranda, who despised tardiness. Having indulged a favorite vice by soaking her long limbs in a hot tub for an hour, she had arrayed herself in a gown of soft velvet a shade or two lighter than indigo. It clung to her slender form like moss to a forest oak. Around her hips she wore a girdle of three golden chains, caught together in clasps front and back and at the hips. Her hair hung free to her shoulders in back. The light of candles in the chandelier above the great dining table evoked witch-fire in her gray eyes.

Father Pelletyr smiled and nodded. As a priest of the Cormyrean Synod, he was celibate, an obligation he took as seriously as his vows of poverty and abjuration of the shedding of blood. But he was a goodly man by nature, and polite.

"It is good to see you allowing the feminine part of you to come to the fore, Zaranda Star," he said.

Stillhawk, who stood brooding by the dark fireplace, greeted his employer and comrade-in-arms with a nod, which she returned.

She smiled at the priest. "Thank you, Father. It's an indulgence I enjoy as well, although I have little opportunity for it on the road."

She walked to the chair at the table's head. The priest's face fell as he noticed the dagger—with jeweled hilt but eminently businesslike blade—that she wore in a gilded sheath at her girdle.

"Ah, but can't you lay aside the implements of war, even for a moment, even in the shelter of your home?" he asked sadly.

"Such implements won me this house, Father," she replied, "and guard it still—as well as my guests within."

"When you have traveled a bit farther with Zaranda Star, Father," a voice said from the doorway, "you'll realize she seldom strays far from her lethal toys."

They turned. Farlorn had arrived, fashionably late, dressed in silken hose and velvet doublet with puffed-and-slashed sleeves, all in shades of dark green, as was his wont. He was a figure of striking elegance, with his hair hanging in ringlets to his shoulders and his yarting slung over his back. He walked to the foot of the table, unslung his yarting and rested it against the table, then flung himself into a chair.

"The battle-axes crossed beneath the ancient shield on the wall, the boar-spear over the fireplace . . . I've not guested in our hostess's hold before, yet I can assure you, none of these is purely for show, Father."

Pelletyr shook his bald head sadly. Zaranda smiled a slight smile and gestured. Flames roared suddenly to life in the fireplace. The father jumped, then looked sheepish.

"The beasts are tended, the men fed," Zaranda said. "Shall we be seated, gentlemen?"

They sat. The door to the kitchens opened. The bugbear bustled in, wearing a leathern apron and carrying a tray laden with silver bowls and a great tureen of steaming soup. Father Pelletyr's eyes bugged slightly, and Farlorn stiffened, one fine hand straying to the ball pommel of the dirk he wore at his own hip. Stillhawk showed no sign of reaction to the huge creature's apparition.

"I swear, Zaranda, those men of yours eat like a herd of dragons," the bugbear rumbled as he set the tureen down in the middle of the table and began to distribute bowls. "That's the reason soup is late, in spite of all my efforts."

"I don't believe dragons come in herds, Gisbertus," she said with a smile as he began to ladle out portions. "And you're my chamberlain and chief steward. Don't we have under-servants so that you need not serve us with your own hands?"

The bugbear tut-tutted and shook his head, making his bat ears wag. "Not one of them could be trusted not to spill soup all over that stunning gown, Zaranda, not a solitary one. You cannot conceive how hard it is to come by competent help these days. They're all fearful of bandits—or eager to run off and become brigands themselves. The cook took off a fortnight ago, and the best replacement I've yet turned up scarce knows a garlic clove from a common thistle, so I've to oversee the cooking in addition to all my other chores."

Father Pelletyr glanced up sharply, having found something even more alarming than the immediate presence of a monster in an apron. "Are we liable to attack here?"

The bugbear's eyebrows crawled up its flat skull. "Good heavens, no, Father! This is Zaranda Star's house. None would dare attack it, never knowing when she might return to avenge such a slight." And he turned and went out with the empty tray.

"Not to mention the fact that the premises are guarded by a bugbear," Farlorn murmured. "How did you manage *that*, Zaranda?"

"Gisbertus? Oh, he's harmless. He's been with me forever." She attacked her soup with her customary appetite.

Seeing that no further explanations were forthcoming, Father Pelletyr picked up his own spoon. "How is it that you came to forswear the practice of magic, Zaranda?" he asked.

"The practice of magic?" She glanced up from her own spoon. "I never did, Father."

"I realize that, child; I saw how you lit the fire, and I've seen you in action. Let me say, the study, then?"

She shrugged. "Too sedentary a life. I like being able to stretch my limbs betimes."

"Few even *attempt* the transition from the way of the wand to the way of the sword."

"It's never been my ambition to be like anybody else, Father."

Gisbertus came back, bearing small fowls baked in clay vessels. These he cracked open with deft strokes of a mallet, leaving neither shards nor dust, then served out the steaming birds.

"What are the tidings, Gisbertus," Zaranda asked, "aside from the difficulties entailed in keeping a domestic staff?"

"Banditry on the rise, and the roads are nowhere safe. Your larger inland cities yet harbor dreams of conquest, but after the fall of Ithmong's tyrant Gallowglass, they've grown quite circumspect. And from Zazesspur comes great talk of restoring the monarchy."

Zaranda laughed. "I asked for fresh tidings, Gisbertus, not the same news as last time I visited, and the time before."

The bugbear sniffed, tucked the serving tray beneath his furry arm, and rose to his full height, endangering the age-blackened timbers of the high ceiling. "The change winds are blowing, Zaranda, mark my words. From every street corner in Zazesspur, halflings preach redistribution of the wealth while the Earl Ravenak preaches the expulsion by force of all nonhumans from the land. Bands of darklings ravage the streets by night, fell creatures who spring from no-one-knows-where to sow terror and dismay."

The bugbear hugged himself and shivered as if to a thrill of horror, eliciting wide-eyed glances of surprise from Farlorn and Pelletyr and, perhaps, the flicker of a smile from Stillhawk.

"The people cry out for a strong man, a Man on Horseback to bring order from chaos."

Zaranda laughed and flared the nostrils of her aristocratic but somewhat skewed nose. "Such a man is like a shooting star: he may portend great fortune or may crash through your roof." She picked up her fowl and tore at it with strong white teeth, and no great daintiness. "I've seen more roofs in need

of mending than folk blessed with fortunes fallen from heaven," she added, chewing thoughtfully.

"Nonetheless," Gisbertus said huskily, "great things are expected from Baron Faneuil Hardisty. He himself seems one of those so blessed. Or so I hear it said. He's the man, not just for Zazesspur, but for all Tethyr. Or so the travelers say."

Zaranda put down her bird and gave him a look of surprise. "Oh, so? Such talk might have gotten a body torn asunder by a mob not so many years ago."

"The change winds, Zaranda. They blow and blow."

"Ah, well." She shrugged and picked up her fowl again. "Air grows stale where no winds blow, as water grows stagnant where there's no flow. Though I've no love for men on horseback, myself."

The bugbear went out again.

"Your help is rather familiar," Farlorn said.

"He's pretty much all the family I have—save my comrades of the road." She glanced at his plate. "You're picking at your food. If you don't want it, I'll take it."

Farlorn's laugh sounded a trifle forced. "Oh, no you don't, Zaranda. It's just that the presence of such a fell creature throws off my appetite."

"Very little throws off mine."

"If Zaranda vouches for him," said Father Pelletyr, biting off the end of a thighbone and sucking out the marrow, "that's good enough for me. The gods have gifted her with sound judgment."

"Well, sometimes," Zaranda said.

"Besides," the priest said, "good Stillhawk eats with fine appetite, and he's suffered more at the hands of evil things than the rest of us combined."

The meal ran to several more courses. Farlorn got over his momentary squeamishness and fell to as eagerly as the others. All four were famished after a long day on the road and the brief excitement at the halfling roadblock. Conversation dwindled, first because the serious business of eating took precedence and then because bellies filled with good food and wine from Ithmong, the fatigue of the trip across the Vilhon Reach—and the more vigorous preliminaries—began to lay hold of them, weighing down their eyelids as well as their tongues.

Stillhawk, who tried for Zaranda's sake to ape the civilized courtesies to which he was unaccustomed, rose first from the table. She looked up at him and nodded.

"The night is warm and fair," she said. "You'll be sleeping outside?"

The ranger nodded. He had little use for feather beds, less for walls and roofs. "In the unlikely event it rains, there are empty stalls in the stable. If Goldie's gambling with the grooms again, run them out. She cheats abominably, anyway."

Stillhawk nodded again and withdrew.

"With your permission, fair lady," Father Pelletyr said, stifling a yawn behind a pudgy hand, "I shall retire to my evening prayers as well." Despite this announcement, he made no move to leave the table.

"My house is yours," she said.

"What of you, Zaranda?" asked Farlorn, lounging with apparent artlessness in a chair of age-stained oak.

"I'm off to my tower, and then to bed."

The half-elven bard pushed a laugh through his fine nostrils. "So that's why you bought yourself a manor with a fine high keep."

"In part," she said, rising and smoothing her gown. It was a gesture of surprising femininity from one whose hands were callused from gripping a sword-hilt.

"I'll never understand the fascination the tiny lights in the sky hold for you, Zaranda," Farlorn said, shaking his head. "They're lovely, aye, and suitable for illuminating lovers and inspiring song. But they're no more than jewels set in a crystal sphere; all know this."

"Perhaps," said Zaranda, frowning slightly. Master of words as well as melodies, Farlorn seldom said anything without good reason, perhaps reasons in layers. The remark he tossed off about the stars illuminating lovers cut close; she'd been sleeping alone for a long time.

Once, long ago, Farlorn the Handsome had been Zaranda's lover. Briefly. They had parted ways and not seen one another again for years. Then, when she was gathering up the risky expedition to Thay that preceded her current journey in the bustling Sembian port of Urmlaspyr, she had chanced to meet him again in an open-air market.

He professed himself willing to undertake an adventure or two. He seemed changed, not quite as ebullient, a shade more somber. But he was a master of stratagem and diplomacy; his jests and songs and tales of wonder could do as much for morale on a long, hard trail as a thrown-open cask of gold; he had the elven stealth in his feet, and his fingers were as nimble wielding his sword and dagger as they were at plying the frets of his yarting. Perhaps the change was due to nothing more than age, though the years lay almost as lightly on him as his wild elf kinfolk—more lightly even than on Zaranda, who wore her winters well. In any event, she had invited him to join her company readily enough, and had already had several occasions to be glad of her choice. And still. . . and still, something about him troubled her.

"Perhaps she seeks to read her fortune in the stars," said the father indulgently. In a mild sort of way, Ilmater disapproved of astrology. The common folk of Faerun suspected it was one of those proscriptions laid down by the god so his servants could feel as if they held the moral high ground in dealing with weaker souls.

"No, Father," Zaranda said. "I misdoubt, somehow, I'd be well served in knowing my future."

The priest raised his eyebrows. "Why, child, most of humanity and demihumanity alike would pay most handsomely for an accurate augury of what the future holds in store."

"Not Zaranda," the bard said, smiling halfway. "She delights in differing from everybody else. Contrary is our Zaranda Star."

She gave him a look. He had one leg, well-turned beneath her gown, thrown over an arm of the chair, and a golden goblet in his hand.

"I don't believe we travel fixed, immutable paths, like oxen yoked to a grindstone," she said. "And anyway no stars, whether jewels in crystal or the suns of distant worlds, control my destiny. That I do myself."

Father Pelletyr shook his head almost mournfully. "Ah, Zaranda, what if everybody felt the way you do? We'd have chaos."

Farlorn laughed, a sound like a golden bell tolling. Zaranda remembered, fugitive, how once that laugh could melt her heart. She wondered why it was

no longer so.

"Chaos is Zaranda's natural element, like water to an eel," he said.

She looked at him again, carefully, as if by the force of her gaze she could ascertain whether his words held a hidden sting. But her long-abandoned studies had given her no magic for that. For his part, the bard was adept at hiding his true feelings behind an easy smile.

She wondered, briefly, if it still rankled him that she, not he, had terminated their affair.

She yawned, covered her mouth with a hand that was slim and graceful for all its strength. Such speculation added no gold to her coffers. That brand of blunt practicality would have made Father Pelletyr sigh for the state of her soul. But she was, after all, a merchant. The bottom line was that she was tired.

"I'm going to bed," she said.

And she left them there, the stout priest gazing contemplatively into the candle flame and Farlorn staring into the depths of his goblet as if he caught a glimpse of his own future there, among the dregs of Zaranda's wine.

Her own bedchamber nestled high in the tower, right beneath her top-level observatory. This served a multiplicity of purposes, not least of which was that if things went severely south in a hurry, she could defend her chambers single-handedly for quite a while. In Tethyr one couldn't take for granted that such things wouldn't happen. This fact accorded well with life as Zaranda had known it all along, so it caused her small discomfort.

"Good evening, Sorceress," said the brazen head on her chest of drawers as she descended the steps—which had uncomfortably high risers, even for one possessed of her length of leg—from her observatory.

"Good evening, head," she said. The breeze through the open but bar-crossed window was cool and sweet and carried the song of a night-bird in with it.

"You are troubled," the head said.

She let the comment pass. The head was quite correct; it was a very perceptive brazen head. She was allowing herself to worry about money and, in particular, her lack of it. If she didn't realize every farthing of the profit she anticipated from her current enterprise, she would at the least lose Morninggold. Her normal specific for such concerns was violent exercise, but the sheer exhaustion that hung on her shoulders like a leaden shroud precluded that.

Life was so much simpler when I was a mere warrior, with nothing to trouble myself over save whom I might next have to swing my sword against.... As soon as she thought it, she knew it was a lie, and faintly ridiculous; the way of the sword, whether as adventurer, mercenary, or even successful war leader against the nomad Tuigan, was far from carefree. Someone, possibly resident of another world, plane, or even time—Faerun being uncommonly porous to artifacts, ideas, and even visitors from such places—had once described life as hours of boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror.

That expressed it rather well. Yet she knew that wasn't full truth either. The warrior's life had its rewards. Battle was terrifying, but it was also exhilarating, filled with wild freedom and fury difficult to capture elsewhere. That was why Zaranda had not entirely forgone the sword when she made the latest change in her life and career—that and the fact that the world was, after all, a risky sort of place.

The truth, Zaranda, she told herself, is that you got bored with the life and decided to settle down. And look how *that's* turned out.

"I can help," the head intoned. Its eyes flashed a beguiling yellow.

Zaranda glanced at it in irritation. It was her preference to sleep unclothed, a fondness she found impractical to indulge on the trail amid an exclusively male contingent of caravan guards and muleteers, and she had been looking forward to that luxury tonight in her own bed in her own secure keep. Now it occurred to her that she was hardly prepared to disrobe with that thing staring unblinking at her from her chest of drawers, which was ornamented with grinning goblin heads carved in bold relief.

"Be silent," she told the head, "or I'll put you back in your chest."

She had ordered the chests containing the truly powerful magic items conveyed to her chamber for security. Perhaps the rarest, most powerful, and

most nearly priceless of all was the brazen head. The product of a mage whose bones had long decayed to dust and scattered on the winds a dragon's age ago, before Elminster was more than a gleam in his father's eye, the head was the bust of a man acerbly handsome, with a scholar's brow and an ascetic's narrow, bearded face. Unfortunately, it had also a satyr's sensibilities, which was why Zaranda was going to be sleeping in her nightgown tonight.

Aside from lips and eyelids, which worked on cleverly crafted hinges, the head's cast-bronze face was immobile. Nonetheless it managed to convey both injured innocence and invitation.

"You have been good to me," it crooned. "Far more congenial than my previous masters for millennia—not to mention easier on the eyes. I would help you. I offer you *secrets*."

"'Secrets,'" Zaranda echoed in disgust. Statue it might have been, but the head was palpably alive, aware of self and surroundings. Zaranda had found herself unable to bear the thought of the thing riding in claustrophobic darkness for weeks without end, so she took it out discreetly whenever she could. And look where your soft heart gets you, she upbraided herself.

"Secrets," the head repeated eagerly. "Secrets of the ancients. Secrets of sorcery long forgotten. The arts mantic, necromantic, or just plain romantic, if that's what you prefer."

"No," Zaranda said. She sat at her dresser, unwound her hair from its braid, let it hang unbound down her back as she brushed it out.

"Come now," the head said. "Any mage alive would kill to know such secrets as I hold within this bronze conk."

"Not me."

"You could gain great power."

"Power doesn't interest me."

"Wealth beyond imagining."

Zaranda grimaced. "At what cost?"

"I hardly expected to find such small-souled niggling within you, Zaranda Star. This merchant life has smirched your soul."

"At least I still have my soul."

"I cannot help noticing," the head said in gilded tones that reminded her uncomfortably—in several ways—of Farlorn, "that for a woman of such striking handsomeness you spend an uncommon percentage of your nights alone. *All* of them, in my limited observation—not to put too fine an edge upon it."

She let that pass and brushed her hair with redoubled vigor.

"You could win the hearts of handsome princes."

"I've done that," she said tightly. She laid the brush down with exaggerated care to keep from smashing it against the dresser. "I've never needed magic, either. And princes aren't worth the bother. Too full of themselves, expecting every whim to be instantly obeyed."

"Ah, but with the lore I can impart, they would live only to obey your every whim."

"If I wanted a pet," she said, rising, "I'd buy a dog. Good night."

The head tut-tutted. "Zaranda, Zaranda. Doesn't your curiosity tempt you, most of all?"

She sat on the edge of her bed, which had four spiral-carved oaken posts

upholding a fringed silk canopy. It was booty from a Tuigan hetman, who had himself looted it from Oghma-knew-where. It was rather ludicrous, but it secretly tickled Zaranda to have it.

"Yes," she admitted. "For example, if you know such secrets of ultimate potency, why don't the Red Wizards of Thay rule all Faerun? They're eager enough to do so."

"Ahh," the head said again. Had it an arm, Zaranda got the strong impression it would have laid one finger along its aquiline nose. "They were unworthy to wield such power. So I answered their queries in riddles until they grew tired of me and shut me up in a dusty, dreary warehouse." It sighed. "The sacrifices I make to maintain the world's balance."

Zaranda sat regarding the head in the yellow candlelight. That was one of the legends that led her to Thay, whispers of a brazen head of immeasurable antiquity and knowledge, whose most recent possessors had been unable to wring any sense from it. Exasperated, they had left it on a shelf a hundred years or so and forgot about it. It had thus become available to anyone with sufficient enterprise, not to mention foolhardy courage. Along came Zaranda and her hardy band.

Once they had reached comparative safety outside Thay, Father Pelletyr had performed divinations on the head. Its nature was so arcane that the cleric had been able to learn little of it, other than that it was definitely not evil in nature, which was the thing Zaranda had been hoping to learn. There was enough unbridled evil in the world, and she didn't care to add to it. Neither did she want to have gone to such hair-raising lengths to obtain the head only to have to cast it into the Inner Sea. But all that left her with more than a slight suspicion that all the bronze skull truly contained was beguiling badinage, that the head was nothing more than a practical joke, a long-dead mage's monument to himself in the form of a last enduring laugh.

"Good night," Zaranda said again, and stretched herself out on the bed. Its softness, just firm enough to avoid bogginess, enveloped her like an angel's embrace. She sighed with pleasure. Not for her was Stillhawk's notion that the best bed was hard ground.

"But you're a magician," the head almost whined. "I can teach you spells beyond imagining."

"I gave that up. Thank you. Good night."

"Don't you feel like taking your gown off? It's fearfully stuffy in here."

For answer Zaranda rolled on her side, facing away from the head, and pulled the counterpane, which had been part of the Tuigan chieftain's trove and was inexplicably covered with embroidered elks and penguins, to her chin.

"Surely you are not by nature so grim and cheerless, Zaranda Star."

"No," she said. "I'm not. Good night." And she gestured out the candles.

* * * * *

The tower of Gold Keep was still visible away up the valley behind them, shining like its namesake in the morning sun, when Vander Stillhawk turned the head of his blood bay back and signed to the column behind him, *Smell smoke*.

"Me, too," Goldie said. "Wood, cloth, straw."

"A farmhouse," Zaranda said grimly. Her eyelids were ever-so-slightly puffy. For all the welcoming softness of her bed, her sleep had been fitful,

troubled by dreams of blackness gathering like a thunderhead on the western horizon, and whispers at once seductive and sinister.

Father Pelletyr came jouncing up on his little donkey. Zaranda's stablehands had bathed the beast and plaited colorful ribbons into its mane and tail. Goldie forbore to pin her ears at it.

"Zaranda, what seems to be the difficulty?" the priest asked.

She pointed. A sunflower of smoke was growing rapidly in the sky to the northwest, pale gray against pale blue.

The priest clutched his Ilmater medallion. "Merciful heavens," he said.

Zaranda turned Goldie sideways on the wagon-rut path that wound its way through short spring-green grass. "Balmeric! Eogast!" she shouted to her sergeant of guards and her dwarven drover-in-chief. "Get the mules off the road and the men into a defensive circle around them. If any armed strangers come within arbalest range, drop them!"

"Must it then be raiders, Zaranda?" Farlorn asked in his lilting baritone, riding up on his gray mare. "It could be some farmer's been dilatory about cleaning the chimney of his cot and set his thatch alight."

"This is Tethyr," she said grimly. She turned Goldie and booted her after Stillhawk, who was already riding at a slant up the ridge to their right. The ranger had unslung his elven longbow from his shoulder. Farlorn shrugged and spurred his mare to follow.

"What of me?" the priest called.

"Stay and watch the caravan," Zaranda called back over her shoulder.

"Be careful, Zaranda!"

"You're wasting your breath, good father!" Farlorn shouted cheerfully back.

She charged for a quarter mile across country that had not entirely settled from the Snowflake foothills into Tethyrian flatland. The ground rolled like gentle ocean swells. Zaranda crested a rise and saw a prosperous farmhouse of at least three rooms. The walls were stone, but the insides and most of the thatch roof burned fiercely.

A woman ran toward Zaranda, rough brown homespun skirts hiked high, round cheeks flushed with fear and exertion. As Zaranda watched, a horseman in blood-sheened leather armor rode up behind her and drove a lance into her back. She uttered a despairing wail and pitched forward on her face.

Zaranda gave forth a wordless falcon-scream of fury, whipped her sword from her scabbard, and spurred Goldie forward. Blue witchfire crackled along the saber's curved blade.

The mounted man had his back to her, tugging at his lance and laughing at the way it made the woman's body move across the ground. Intent on his game, he had no hint of danger. Three rough-clad men in the hen yard, though, spotted Zaranda and loosed a volley of arrows at her from their short bows.

It was a fatal mistake. Like the elves who had raised him and trained him, Stillhawk was no horse-bowman. He had already dropped to the grass without reining in his bay, and was running off his momentum with his long brown lean-thewed legs. Even as he ran, he nocked an arrow and released, then, running, reached into his quiver for another.

The arrows that struck the second and third short bowmen down were already in flight when the two men turned their heads to gape at the broad-

headed arrow that had transfixed the first one's throat.

The short-bow volley fell wide, arrows hissing into the grass like snakes. "Randi, they're shooting at us," Goldie panted. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

They were almost upon the horseman, who still hadn't freed his weapon from his victim. Ignoring her mare, Zaranda screamed, "Look me in the eye before you die, you scum!"

The horseman was quick on the uptake. He let go his trapped lance immediately, and was drawing his broadsword even as he turned. He saw Zaranda charging not twenty feet away, bared yellow teeth, and flung his sword high for a downward stroke.

Zaranda dug her heels into Goldie's flanks, urging her into a final surge of speed. As the mare dashed past the larger horse, Zaranda slashed forehand beneath the upraised arm. Her magic-imbued blade sliced almost effortlessly through stained leather, meat, and bone with a humming, crackling sound.

The raider fell, his final expression one of bewilderment. "I hate that sour-milk smell," Goldie complained as Zaranda reined her in, almost in the burning cottage's yard. "Why did you have to get a magic sword imbued with lightning? It's not as if it actually throws bolts or anything... Uh-oh."

The last remark was elicited by the fact that, in spite of being well and truly on fire, the cot was disgorging marauders, half a dozen of them, casting away loot bundled into pillowcases in order to draw their blades. They were dirty, unkempt, and unshaven, dressed in rags and tag ends of armor, and their weapons were in as dire need of cleaning as their teeth. The armaments looked serviceable enough, despite their lamentable condition.

Three more horsemen came drumming out from around the far side of the burning house. One of them had two wing-fluttering hens, one black, one white-and-black checked, tied by the feet to the pommel of his saddle. He brandished a sword, as did one of his mounted fellows. The third swung the spiked, fist-sized ball of an aspergillum-style morningstar on its chain about his helmeted head.

Zaranda winced; they were devilish things to defend against.

The riders showed cunning. Rather than rushing straight at the mounted interloper, they spurred their horses wide, hoping to pin her against the house and the semicircle of footmen. Zaranda just had time to wheel Goldie about and dart for safety.

But that was never her style.

"Head down, babe," she murmured to her mare, and nudged her hard with her heels.

"You don't want me—"

"Go!"

The golden palomino mare put her head down and lunged forward—straight for the doorway of the flaming cottage. Zaranda laid her magic saber about her, looping left and right so that the blade formed wings that shimmered silver gossamer in the morning sun. Utterly astonished by her mad forward rush, the footmen broke to either side. She felt Crackletongue's enchanted steel bite flesh gratifyingly as she passed.

Then she laid her body forward along Goldie's arched neck, and the mare lunged into the building, trailing a despairing cry of "Za-ran-daaa!" Smoke drooled upward over the lintel of the doorframe, caressing Zaranda's nose

and eyes with stinging fingers. Then they were inside, hooves thumping on earth packed hard and soaked with beasts' blood in classic Tethyrian country fashion, dried into a smooth hard maroon surface like glazed tile and covered with rush straw. Flames ran like dancing rat spirals up the ornately carved posts that upheld the roof, and wound about the roof beams a handspan above Zaranda's unarmored back. She felt their heat, heard their lustful crackle, felt embers fall on the back of her neck, smelled her own hair start to burn.

As she hoped, there was a kitchen door. They burst through into the relative cool of open. Woman and mare released the breath they had been holding and filled their lungs with blessed clean air. Zaranda let go the reins, which she held only from long equestrian habit, to bat away the sparks lodged in Goldie's mane and her own hair.

"Aren't you getting too old for this, Randi?" gasped the mare.

Zaranda threw back her hair and laughed like a schoolgirl. "No!"

Two horsemen appeared around the stone corner to Zaranda's left. Zaranda brought Goldie round to meet them. Then the sudden backward pivot of the mare's long ears alerted her that the third one had circled to take her from behind.

"Not so *fast*, buster," Goldie said as the third horse, a white stallion, ran up on her. "We hardly know each other."

She launched a sudden savage kick with both rear feet. The stallion screamed and shied back as a steel-shod hoof gouged a divot from his shoulder. His rider, the man with the mace-on-a-stick, groaned and sagged, clutching his thigh. Goldie's other hoof had caught him square, with luck breaking the femur or at the least giving him a deep bone bruise and an excellent set of cramps.

With one foe out of the fight, however temporarily, Zaranda charged the other two. The rider on Zaranda's left sat a stubby little pony a hand shorter than Goldie, who wasn't as dainty as she effected to believe. Zaranda put her mare's shoulder right into the smaller beast's chest, rocking the pony back on its haunches and fouling its rider's sword strokes, while Zaranda traded ringing cuts with the man to her right.

The bandit swordsman had greater strength, but Zaranda was used to that. Though she was tall and strong, most men were stronger. Skill and speed were her edges. In an exchange that flashed with more than sunlight, she took a nick in the shoulder but left the man's right side in ribbons and his cheek laid open, streaming blood into a matted gray-flecked beard. Frantically, he sidestepped his horse away from the blade storm.

All this time Goldie had been driving the pony back, trying to force its rump against the house's stone flank, and grunting mightily to let Zaranda know how hard she was working. The rider, who had a gap in his teeth and a right eye that looked at random out across the bean-fields, finally hit the notion of yanking his mount's head to the right and trying to slide past the mare.

As he did so, he hacked cross-body at Zaranda's face, hoping to down her while her attention was on his comrade. "Randi, duck!" shouted Goldie.

Zaranda threw herself to her right, letting her left foot slip from the stirrup, snagging the knee on the pommel to keep herself from leaving the saddle entirely. She whipped Crackle tongue over and across her body, deflecting the broadsword so that it skimmed her rump and thunked into her saddle's cantle.

With a backhand slash, she laid the man's face open. He screamed and dropped his sword, clutching his face with his hands.

With a bellow of triumph, the grizzle-bearded man spurred his horse at her, bringing his own blade up for the kill. A hissing sound, and he crossed his eyes to look at the bright, slim tip of Farlorn's rapier, which suddenly protruded from his breast. The blade slid inside him like a serpent's tongue, and out his back. He slumped from the saddle.

The cockeyed man had fallen to the grass beside the kitchen stoop and lay curled in a ball, sobbing.

"Thanks," said Zaranda with a nod to Farlorn. The bard grinned and saluted her with a flourish of his blade.

Zaranda looked at the man with the morningstar, who sat a wary ten yards off, massaging his thigh. "Surrender, and we'll let you live," she told him, "as long as you're willing to answer a few questions."

The man grimaced in pain and licked greasy lips. "Does that mean *just as long* as I'm answering questions?" he asked.

"Zaranda," a familiar voice called timidly from the farmhouse's far side. "Could you, ah—could you show yourself, please?"

Zaranda turned and frowned at Farlorn. "Father Pelletyr?" she said. He shrugged. The morningstar man took advantage of their distraction to spur his horse away behind some apple trees covered with tiny green buds of fruit.

Farlorn dismounted to see to the man Zaranda had struck down. She rode Goldie back around the side of the cot, swinging well wide to avoid flames billowing from window and roof.

On the last grassy rise Zaranda and her comrades had crossed before hitting the farmhouse, a lone rider sat. He was a vast man, a good eight feet tall, astride a horse at least eighteen hands high and as broad as a beer-cart, which might have served a northern knight as a destrier but more likely was born to pull a plow. The man wore a hauberk of tarnished scale armor and, across one mountainous shoulder, bore a great double-bitted battle-axe with a six-foot helve. The restless wind made the hair of his topknot stream like a greasy black pennon.

Beside him, four ragged men on foot had Father Pelletyr by the arms. One of them held a knife blade, crusted with rust and ominous dark stains, against the cleric's throat.

"Zaranda," the priest said apologetically, "these gentlemen claim to be tax-collectors. If they're about their lawful business, it's wrong of us to interfere."

Farlorn had emerged from behind the house on his dapple-fanned gray. He answered Zaranda's query-look with a shrug to indicate the man she'd struck was no longer an issue. Then he glanced up the rise, and a smile quirked his handsome lips.

"Our good father was always one for following instructions," he murmured.

"Who dares," the monstrous rider bellowed, "interfere with the servitors of Baron Pundar on their lawful business?"

"Zaranda Star dares that and more," Zaranda declared. "Especially since I happen to be Countess Morninggold. Father, this beast's misled you; this is still County Morninggold, and these men no more than looters—and murderers."

She tossed her head haughtily, making her namesake blaze flash in the sun. "Who dares to name that hedge-robber Pundar of Little Consequence 'baron'— and to prey upon *my* people?"

The morningstar man with the injured leg had circled round and now rode up to join his apparent leader. He stopped and turned back to the house. "Pundar is too a baron," he called through cupped hands. "He has a piece of paper from the capital that proves it!"

"The capital?" Zaranda said, half to herself. "Since when is there a capital in Tethyr?"

"Why, Zazesspur—ow!"

The giant man had ridden a few steps forward and with a great backhanded clout knocked the morningstar man from the saddle.

"I do the talking here," he roared. "I am Togrev the Magnificent, lord high commander of the armed forces of Pundaria! We claim these lands by ancient right, as approved and attested by Zazesspur."

Zaranda and Farlorn had begun to ride forward. They could see the house's front now. Two of the footmen lay in unmoving lumps in the pigsty; the other four stood with hands up, looking nervously at Stillhawk, who stood covering them with an arrow nocked.

"By rights," Zaranda told Togrev, "we should hang the lot of you as the murderous bandit scum you are."

"You forget," the lord high commander said, and gestured with a black-nailed hand. A few feet from the captive cleric the little ass had its head down, cropping obliviously at the sweet spring grass. "I have your priest."

"For all the good that does you," Zaranda said. "It's poor practice to negotiate for hostages, and as a rule I won't do it."

Father Pelletyr squirmed his right arm free enough to touch himself four times on the breast in the sign of the rack on which Ilmater suffered. Then he crossed his hands before his breast as if they were bound and rolled his eyes heavenward, accepting. The cleric had a notable reluctance to face physical danger, but this was martyrdom, which made all the difference in the world.

"However," Zaranda said, stopping her horse twenty yards downslope from the huge man, "somebody needs to be left alive to tell that mound of ankheg droppings Pundar that if he troubles my people again he'll wake some fine spring night with a fireball in his lap."

"And who would cast such a fireball?" demanded Togrev in an avalanche rumble.

"I would."

The morningstar man had rolled over and was sitting in the grass and rubbing the back of his neck. "She's a witch, Togrev," he said. "She knows all kind of wild magics. Beware her spells."

"Listen to the man," Zaranda said.

The huge man frowned at her. His brows beetled impressively. "Half-ogre, by the smell of him," Goldie muttered as the wind backed. "Ick."

"What will you do, then?" Togrev demanded.

"Kill you in single combat."

"You want me to fight *that*?" Goldie demanded in a whisper, nodding at the gigantic plowhorse. "He's as clumsy as a barrel of boulders, but if he ever connects, sweet Sune preserve me!"

Togrev frowned more impressively still, as if there were something here he didn't quite get. "Why should I go along with that?" he asked after a few heartbeats.

"Because if you don't, we'll slaughter you and all your men, and I'll whistle up a wind elemental to drop your head in Pundar's pigsty with a note attached."

"When did you learn to summon elementals?" Farlorn hissed out the side of his mouth in elf-speech, which half-ogres as a rule didn't understand.

"Never," replied Zaranda in the same tongue, which she grasped well enough but could only speak in pidgin. "Now shut up." She swung down from Goldie and stepped to the side to stand facing the half-ogre, legs braced and hands on hips. The wind stroked her face and ruffled her hair. The springtime smell would have been quite refreshing except that Goldie was quite right about Togrev: he was a half-ogre, manifestly, and lived up to their usual standards of hygiene.

Togrev rumbled deep in his cavernous chest and swung down from his massive mount. Goldie flared her nostrils and blew out a long breath. Zaranda fought to keep her own shoulders from sagging in relief.

"And when I beat you, pathetic woman-thing?" the bandit chief demanded.

"If you win, you and your men go free. If you lose, your men still go free. This is really a pretty good deal I'm offering."

"Are you sure this is wise?" asked Farlorn out loud.

"No," Zaranda said, "but it'll be very soothing to my anger, one way or another."

Togrev scratched his unshaven chin and pondered.

"Ware magic, Lord Commander!" the morningstar man exclaimed. "She's a witch, I tell you!"

"How is that fair?" the half-ogre asked in aggrieved tones. "You'll just cheat and use some witching tricks. You could never best me otherwise. I am Togrev the Magnificent!"

"Compared to what?" murmured Farlorn.

"If you agree to meet me alone, with no outside interference from either side, I shall forbear to use any magic against you. I'll forgo even the blessings of my priest. Does that satisfy you?"

For answer the half-ogre swung his great axe in a wild flourish that ended with it poised above his head. The passage of air through inlets cut through

the head made it moan like a lost soul.

"Prepare to break!" he roared.

"Not so fast," Zaranda said with a firm shake of the head. "My priest."

Togrev glowered at her. Then he nodded. "Let the fat pig go." His men gaped at him "Do it!" he roared. They let go of Father Pelletyr and stepped away as if he'd grown hot in their grasp.

The priest brushed himself off. "I forgive you," he murmured to his erstwhile captors.

Stillhawk herded his captives up the rise. They joined the dismounted morningstar man and the four who had held the cleric on one side of the combat ground. The Dalesman—who was as sparing with words as any speaking ranger—looked rebellious when Zaranda signed him to put his knocked arrow back in its quiver. Her eyes met his and held them for a moment. He nodded and complied.

As Zaranda was turning her head to look at her opponent once again, he charged with speed surprising in one so huge. Which still wasn't very fast in absolute terms, but it had served him well in the past, taking enemies by surprise and stunning them into momentary—and fatal—inaction.

Zaranda was molded of different metal. Without hesitation, she threw Crackletongue up to meet the axe. She did not try to block the strike; had she done so, the weight of the axe and the man behind it would have broken her arm and its blade would have cloven her, regardless. Instead the flat of her saber struck the haft right behind the bit, guiding the monstrous moaning weapon past her as she pirouetted aside.

At the instant of meeting, her sword emitted a snarl and shower of blue sparks. Crackletongue did that on making contact with creatures consecrated to evil, thus confirming something Zaranda had already surmised.

With her help, the axe blade bit deep into the soft flesh of the hillside. Zaranda rolled her wrist and slashed forehand for the great corded neck. Togrev roared and threw his body back and to the side. Crackletongue's tip sparked as it bit, but it did no more than cut skin, cauterizing the slight wound as it left it.

Flash-fast, the half-ogre had wrenched free his axe, throwing out clods of earth, and whipped it into guard position before his metal-scaled breast. Zaranda sprang away to face him, half-crouched, Crackletongue held out before her, muttering and flickering with magic.

"Not bad," she said. "You're quick for such a wad of blubber."

An impressive paunch strained the seams of Togrev's hauberk, but he was by no means a wad of blubber. For some reason Zaranda had found the few ogres and half-ogres she'd had dealings with—none friendly—were one and all sensitive to suggestions that they were fat. An angry foe was seldom a clearheaded one. And if the brute's that agile, she thought, I need all the edge I can get.

He seemed to be right-handed. She circled that direction, clockwise around him. He began pivoting to face her, and at the same time edging toward her. Then he snapped the great axe up and back as if it were a jackstraw, cocking for a strike.

She lunged. The half-ogre screamed like a wounded horse as Crackletongue's tip sank a handbreadth into the bulging triceps of his left arm. There was a sizzle and stink of burning flesh, and then Zaranda hurled herself

past her foe, twisting her sword as she ripped it free, trying to do the maximum harm.

It wasn't enough to incapacitate the tree-trunk arm. With blood streaming black from a wound too large for Crackletongue's sparks to close, Togrev swung the axe in a howling horizontal arc. Once again his reaction time surprised Zaranda. She had no time to parry, could only jump backward with arms flung high to keep them from harm's way.

Father Pelletyr cried out in shared anguish as the axe blade kissed her flat belly. The marauder section of the audience stamped and hooted approval. Goldie whinnied alarm.

"I'm fine," gasped Zaranda. Her awareness of her own body was good, good enough that she needn't glance down to know that the axe had done no more than lay open skin. Which was good, because had she glanced at herself, she would have died.

With shocking speed the half-ogre brought the axe around and up and *down*. Zaranda had to throw herself into a shoulder roll to avoid being split in two as the axe plunged deep into the earth.

Togrev snatched it free again, hurled it high, and ran at his foe as she rolled up onto one knee. His face split in a jag-toothed grin. He had her now; she was in no position to shift left or right fast enough to escape him, nor could she run away. The axehead seemed to scream in triumph as it descended for the killing blow.

Zaranda dived for the monster. She ducked her head and somersaulted forward. As she and Togrev passed in opposite directions, Crackletongue licked out and caressed the back of one great knee.

Togrev vented a pain-squeal like that of a cracked organ pipe. He went crashing past her like a boulder down a Snowflake peak. His wounded leg simply folded beneath him when he put his weight upon it. Zaranda's blow had hamstrung him.

Once more he showed himself hateful-quick, slamming the butt of his axe-helve against the earth like a crutch, saving himself from rolling headlong. He got his uninjured right leg beneath him, came back upright, took three great hops away and pivoted, leaning on the great axe.

Zaranda got deliberately to her feet. The half-ogre stood snarling at her, his left leg booted in scarlet.

"Now," she said, "let's finish this." She started forward.

"*Randi!*" Goldie screamed.

By reflex Zaranda dived forward. As she did, something struck the back of her head with jarring impact and clawing pain. She went sprawling on the grass.

Sparks fountained behind her eyes. Her head rang like a dwarven smith's forge. She blinked to clear her vision, saw Togrev looming over her like a colossus, great axe poised above his head. He had only to fall forward to cleave her in two.

Behind her she heard malicious laughter and the sliding song of a spiked morningstar head circling on its chain. Her right hand, miraculously, still held Crackletongue. She looked back at the marauder who had struck her from behind, flung her left arm toward him, forefinger pointed.

"Twenty feet and six!" she gasped. A light like an orange-glowing crossbow bolt flashed past the morningstar man's left hip.

He hooted shrill triumph through his nose. "Missed!" He swung the morningstar.

The light-bolt flew twenty feet away and six feet up, then exploded. Laughter turned to scream as the fireball's fringe engulfed the man with the morningstar.

Zaranda turned her head. Togrev was in the process of toppling toward her, his axe making the air itself scream pain. With all the power in her flat-muscled belly, Zaranda jackknifed, thrusting Crackletongue into his gut.

Her magic blade bit through the overlapped steel plates of his hauberk and the thick leather beneath, through sweaty, hairy skin and then fat to muscle bunched beneath. And there Crackletongue's magic and Zaranda's strength failed her. The saber would penetrate no farther.

Zaranda's presence of mind had not deserted her, though. She guided the butt of her basketed sword-hilt to the earth beside her, then rolled clear as Togrev's own momentum completed the task of spitting him.

For a while Zaranda just lay on her belly, tasting grass-flavored air and bits of dark, moist soil that had found their way into her mouth. They tasted good. Even the dirt.

Finally she rolled over and tried to sit up. Her head began performing interesting acrobatics, and she almost fell back. A hand grabbed her biceps and held her up.

She nodded weak thanks and looked up. To her surprise it was Farlorn who held her, not Father Pelletyr. The priest was hunched over, shoulders heaving as if he were gasping for breath. He clutched the center of his chest. His face was red.

With Farlorn's help Zaranda picked herself up. She nodded again, patted the half-elven bard's hand to signify that he could let her go. He hesitated, then did so and stepped back.

Stillhawk had an arrow nocked and drawn back to his ear, holding down on the surviving captives, who had all gone the color of new papyrus or old paper behind their sundry whiskers and coatings of grime. They were staring at the smoking corpse of the morningstar man, their eyes like holes in sheets.

"That's right," she croaked. "He was right. I am a witch. A wizard, in any event. But unlike him, I'm one who keeps my faith. Now go."

The marauders cast a final look at Stillhawk, then lit out running over the gently rolling hills.

Zaranda turned back to Father Pelletyr.

"Randi," Goldie said, "he doesn't look too good."

"Father, are you all right?" Zaranda asked.

"I'm fine." He waved a hand at her. "It's just—these pains in my chest and left arm. They soon shall pass, martyred Ilmater willing."

"If you say so." Zaranda walked over to her mare. What she intended as a hug turned into a grab for support as her knees momentarily buckled.

Goldie held her head up, shying from Zaranda's attempt to stroke her cheek. "You take some crazy risks, Zaranda," she said with exaggerated primness.

Zaranda realized the mare was humiliated by her earlier panicky lapse into *horse*. She laughed and scratched Goldie's neck until she found the itchy spot horses always have, and the mare arched her neck and bobbed her head in pleasure. Zaranda hugged her again and let her go.

The erstwhile lord high commander of the Barony of Pundaria lay in an unmoving mound, Crackle tongue protruding from his broad back. The curved blade no longer crackled and sparked with magic. Dead meat knows no alignment.

"All right, then," Zaranda said. "Who'll help me turn this carrion over and reclaim my blade?"

"Have you heard?" the peasant asked. He had a large and colorful wart on the side of his nose and a leather bonnet pulled down over his ears. His garments had been patched until they were more quilt than clothing and still more hole than fabric. "There's a strong man rising in Zazesspur town. And high time, too. He'll bring order back to the land."

"Aye," said another, equally ragged, who was chewing a tufted stalk of timothy grass. He pawed through the assortment of brass implements and cooking vessels Zaranda had spread upon a horse blanket beneath an oak tree that shaded one patch of the tiny village green. He wore a tattered and shapeless felt hat against the noonday sun. "We need strong government, an' that's a fact."

The rest of the throng of prospective shoppers nodded and murmured assent. Like the two who had spoken, and like the village and farmhouses themselves, the villagers had a dusty, threadbare, ground-down look.

The caravan's mules grazed on the grass of the common—for which the local mayor had exacted an advance fee—while their drovers and riders watered themselves in the village's lone tavern—for which the local mayor also exacted tariff, inasmuch as he was the tavernkeeper.

Zaranda had left the bulk of the train encamped in a laager and made a detour through the city of Ithmong with a few muleloads of nonmagical luxury items—spices, dyes, vials of scent, incense-cones. They found an increase in prosperity and decrease in paranoia since the ouster of Gallowglass, with his tyrant's dreams and schemes. Zaranda had parlayed the wares into a dozen new mules loaded with more conventional goods such as tinware, pins, nails, and bolts of colored cloth to trade to the peasants and village folk along the route to Zazesspur.

It was penny-ante commerce, and Zaranda would be doing well to break even. She didn't care. It was a cheap way to garner intelligence and goodwill, and besides she felt for the people of the Tethyr countryside. Between bandits and big-city ambitions, only a rare armed caravan such as hers ever reached them. Otherwise the countryfolk had no access to goods beyond what they made themselves, which was why every mobile soul for miles had come pouring into town as news of the caravan's arrival spread.

Goldie stood to one side watching the proceedings with interest. Now she cocked an eye at the grass-chewing peasant who had proclaimed the need for strong government.

"Why do you say that?" she asked. The man only goggled at her slightly; word that the caravan leader rode a talking mare had spread quickly through the village. "That's like saying you need more locusts."

"Now, Golden Dawn," Father Pelletyr said, munching a cold chicken leg, "you shouldn't talk that way."

"You don't think I should talk at all, Father."

"Now, child, you know that's not true—"

"Begging your leave," the peasant said pointedly around his grass stalk, "but our neighbors have more wealth than we."

"Truer words never saw daylight," agreed his friend in the cap. "A good, strong government would take it from them and give it to us."

"Why should they do that?" Goldie asked.

The locals looked at her in consternation. "Because we are hardworking and worthy sons and daughters of Tethyr."

"Aren't they the same?"

The crowd began to give the mare hard looks. "Do not trouble yourself overmuch with her babblings, good folk," Farlorn said suavely. "She's merely a dumb animal."

The peasants looked at each other, then nodded and went back to their shopping.

"I'll show you a dumb animal, you ringleted gigolo," Goldie grumbled.

"Goldie!" Zaranda said sharply.

The bard laughed. "Would you rather be thought a dumb animal or someone whose opinions are so seditious she should be chopped up into food for hounds?"

For once Goldie had no answer. Father Pelletyr beamed indulgently as he bit into a raw onion he'd bought from a farmer—more early yield from the long Southern growing season. "They're right, anyway," he said. "A good, strong government is a benefit to all."

"Isn't envy a sin in Ilmater's eyes?" Zaranda asked quietly. The cleric looked blank. She decided not to press it; the crowd might decide *she* was better off as dog food, and while she was intrepid, by her reckoning she'd faced enough angry mobs in her lifetime.

The inn door opened. Three men emerged into the brilliant midday sun, managing at once to saunter and swagger. They were typical Tethyrian bravos in garish costume, with puffed blouses and extravagantly padded codpieces, which tended to turn any sort of walk into a swagger. They arranged their broad-brimmed hats and floridly dyed plumes and walked across the road to the green.

Stillhawk watched them closely with his brooding dark eyes. He had sealed his bow in a waterproof case of some soft and supple hide that Zaranda suspected to be kobold skin—the elves had some folkways that seemed pretty abrupt by human standards. A man of the Dalelands, and an obvious ranger at that, was a substantial novelty in the sparsely forested Tethyrian plains. Zaranda feared he might excite the villagers unduly if he wandered around with an elven longbow strung and ready for action. He wore his long sword, also of elvish make, scabbarded at his hip.

He dropped a hand as dark and hard as weathered wood to the hilt and looked a query at Zaranda. *Stand easy*, she signed to him.

The newcomers carried swords with elaborate hilts and blades so broad they each had two deep, wide fuller grooves—which lightened weight and increased structural integrity and hadn't a blessed thing to do with letting blood flow, as the ignorant would have you believe. These swords weighed about five pounds each, which was in the upper range for anybody of human strength to wield one-handed and expect to live. Daggers they had as well, daggers in profusion: broad-bladed daggers, slim poniards, misericords, dirks, toadstickers, and hunting knives with grips of kobold bone. These blades hung all about their harness as if, come combat, they anticipated sprouting extra arms and fighting in the manner of the intelligent octopi rumored to haunt the rocks off the coast of Lantan in the Trackless Sea. But enough of blades.

There was nothing intrinsically sinister about the three. Their garb,

outlandish and weapon bedizened as it was, was no more than what was fashionable among Tethyrian bravos, particularly soldiers-of-fortune—which these appeared to be. Their gait was fairly steady, which indicated they likely hadn't imbibed enough in the tavern to make them boisterous. They could turn into trouble, but didn't constitute automatic menace.

"Ho," said one with ginger-colored mustachios waxed into wings. He approached Stillhawk. "Are you the master of this traveling circus?"

The ranger nodded to Zaranda. The bravos looked to her and shrugged. Taller than any of them, with her man's garb and her saber with its well-worn hilt slung now at her own waist, Zaranda Star did not invite men to trifle with her, for all her handsomeness. Instead they craned to look past the mob of locals rummaging through the goods on the racks and drop cloths.

The tallest of the sell-swords, whose black hair hung in tight perfumed curls to his shoulders and who wore tights that were vertically striped red, blue, and yellow on one leg, and purple with yellow stars on the other, elevated a long and lordly nose.

"Rubbish for rubes," he opined. A general growl rose from the locals, but instead of pressing, they edged away from the heavily armed trio. Ignoring them, the black-ringed bravo looked square at Zaranda. "Have you nothing more worthwhile than straight pins and thimbles?"

"Straight pins and thimbles are amply worthwhile for folk who have none," said Zaranda evenly. She made it a habit not readily to take offense, and to deal in general in the calmest manner possible. This habit was highly profitable to a merchant. Her mastery of swordsmanship and her latent skill at magic made it easier for her to maintain the required serenity of mind.

"We have some swords and daggers from the East," Farlorn said. "Wondrous work, of a style seldom seen in these parts." Zaranda had coached him carefully in advance: Tethyrians tended to prize craftsmanship above all things.

The third man waved him off. His close-cropped brown hair and the yellowish scar that ran from one eye to his broad, stubble-clad jaw belied the foppery of his dress. "Weapons we have. Have you good magic?"

Farlorn cocked an eyebrow at Zaranda. A little sardonically; this was her call to make, though Farlorn was one who little cared to defer to others. But he was, after all, in her pay.

Here was a cusp of sorts. Zaranda was ready enough to sell her goods to whoever was willing to pay a good price for them. The nicety here was whether the query sprang from mere curiosity, a prospective customer's interest, or something more sinister. On their own account, these three worried Zaranda little, particularly with Farlorn and grim Stillhawk at her side. But who knew how many comrades they had out of sight outside the village, who might be eager to ambush even such a well-guarded caravan as this for sufficiently tempting plunder? Magic items were always in demand, immensely valuable in their own right and readily convertible to cash anywhere in Faerun.

Which, of course, was why a comparative handful of rare and powerful objects from fiend-haunted Thay provided the backbone of the profit Zaranda hoped to realize on this expedition.

"Are you mages?" she asked. "Could you, say, read a spell scroll, or ply an enspelled wand?"

Ginger Mustachios spread hands no less scarred than Stillhawk's. "We are

simple fighting men. We have no skill with spells. Still, we can use enchanted weapons as readily as the next man."

Zaranda shook her head and smiled thinly. "I regret that the only magic weapons we have are those we ourselves carry. And they're not for sale."

It was the truth. They had won some enchanted weapons on the Thay expedition, but without exception these had been cursed, or such that they would turn and bite the hand of anyone who tried to wield them who wasn't a devotee of a dark god such as Cyric or Talos. Such objects were valuable to certain folk, of course, but Zaranda found it uncomfortable at best to have dealings with them. They were also of considerable interest to collectors with more risqué tastes, particularly in the West. In Zaranda's experience, though, the potential for trouble outweighed the potential profit, so she had—not without a twinge of regret—opted to leave them where they lay.

Ginger Mustachios frowned briefly, and for a moment Zaranda thought he might cause trouble; Tethyrian bravos often dealt poorly with disappointment and tended not to reckon odds when they were angry. But instead, he shrugged and glanced over at his burly, scar-faced comrade, who had found a brazen oil lamp that had in fact come from far Rashemen in the Unapproachable East, and represented the upper limit of the luxury items the countryfolk might afford. This the man was rubbing surreptitiously on his sleeve.

"What ho, Argolio?" the mustachioed man sang out, clapping his companion's thick shoulder. "Think what you're doing, man. If by some chance this tall, foreign-born vixen had overlooked a magic lamp from the East, what then? Had a djinn appeared with a flash and a puff of smoke, next thing you knew you'd be down at the village midden, wringing out your codpiece!"

The heavily built man flushed, turning his scar a painful pink. He hurriedly put the lamp back.

The tall one shook back his aromatic hair. "I'm bored," he announced to the afternoon breeze, gradually rising from the east. "Let's away."

"Whither bound?" asked Farlorn.

"To Zazesspur," the ginger-haired man declared as the three walked back to where their mounts were tethered to tarnished brass rings on stone posts. "Baron By-Your-Leave-Fanny, or whatever they may call him, is hiring men with strong arms and stout hearts for the civic guard. His guilders spend as well as any man's, or I'm an Amnian." The inhabitants of the country immediately to the north were generally considered boors by Tethyrians, few of whom had ever actually encountered one.

"Better yet," the scar-faced man said too loudly, trying to make up for his earlier embarrassment, "there are monsters to slay and treasures to seize. That's the way to go adventuring! Never faring far from the comforts of favored tavern and favored wench, ho-ho!"

The three mounted their horses, turned them with flamboyant caracoles and accompanying swirls of dust, and rode off to the west, uttering high-pitched yips.

Zaranda watched them go, arms akimbo. "The civic guard," she repeated.

"Perhaps this Baron Faneuil is just the man anarchy-ridden Tethyr needs," Father Pelletyr said. He took another bite from his onion.

"How can you *do* that, Father?" Zaranda asked.

* * * * *

A day and a half west from the little village in which they had encountered the three mercenaries, the country took on a bit more of a lilt and roll. East of Zaranda's county, which lay almost in the Snowflake foothills, the land grew steadily flatter and more sere. Now it was beginning to green about them again as they drew nearer the sea. They even began to see trees, alone or in small woods, that did not cluster along watercourses and had not been planted to give shade or windbreak.

It was still all but desolation to the northerly eyes of Zaranda's comrades.

Farlorn had his yarting unshipped and was playing and singing a song in a strange tongue as they rode. "The very words are music, O Bard," Father Pelletyr said. "What language is that?"

"Wild Elvish," Farlorn said. He had a distant, dreamy expression on his face. "The language of my mother's people. Do you know much Elvish, Father?"

The cleric shook his balding head. "Alas, I do not. I am only a poor priest of Ilmater, blessings to his name. It has never been my calling to minister to the folk of the woods."

Farlorn laughed, not unkindly. "You've saved much breath in that wise, Father. The Green Elves have small use for the religions of man. Or any other of their works, or ought to do with them at all."

"They must have *some* use for humans," Goldie remarked, "else where did you come from?"

It seemed to Zaranda that the bard colored slightly, but he ignored the mare, continuing to address Father Pelletyr: "Small matter at all events, for the wild elf tongue is strange even to elven ears, though all the People can with effort comprehend it. And you have spoken wisely, for of all the tongues of Faerun, Wild Elvish is the closest to music pure."

"And what is this beauteous song about, good bard?" the cleric asked, taking a bite from a plum he'd bought from an urchin up the road.

"An elvish maiden sits by a pool in the wood, watching her tears mingle with the clear crystal waters. She has just learned that her lover has been taken and tortured to death by orcs. Soon she will open the veins of her wrist, and she sings of how she will be joined once again with her love, when her lifeblood stains the water like wine."

The cleric swallowed. "Delightful, I'm sure," he said weakly.

Farlorn urged his gray knee-to-knee with Zaranda's mare, favoring Zaranda with a wink. "It's really a set of bawdy limericks I heard in Teshwave," he told her in Elvish. "They do sound pretty translated into my own tongue, don't they?"

Zaranda just shook her head. Farlorn flashed her a quick grin, and she felt a tug at her heart, like fingers plucking her sleeve. No, she told herself firmly. All that's between you and him is business. Leave it thus.

Farlorn struck a fresh cord on his yarting.

Riding about twenty yards ahead of Zaranda, Stillhawk suddenly held up a hand.

"What is it?" Zaranda called softly.

Fighting, Stillhawk signed. *Up ahead*.

Zaranda sighed. *Well, 'tis Tethyr. What can you expect?* She wasn't yet ready to fall into lockstep behind this baron in Zazesspur, but she did have to

admit something needed to be done about the bandits.

After having passed the halfling barricade, the caravan had encountered little trouble. Occasionally it had been shadowed by furtive watchers. Zaranda lacked the wild-craft of her two companions, inborn in the case of Farlorn, gained through painstaking training in Stillhawk's case, but as a veteran campaigner, she had seen her share of reconnoitering and ambush. The covert surveillance had never gone long undetected. In the cases in which it persisted, Stillhawk had slipped off to discourage it—puzzled by his friend and employer's insistence that he take no life unless he was offered violence.

On two occasions Stillhawk detected skulkers actually lying in ambush, and these he dealt with in summary fashion, leaving no survivors to learn new lessons in the need for stealth.

Several larger armed parties with no obvious business had likewise been encountered, including a score of men on horseback, warriors with ill-kept weapons and ragged cloaks. But Zaranda had assembled her caravan with care. To the observer the caravan looked neither unduly large nor prosperous, and while well guarded, was not so much so as to indicate the richness of the pickings. In truth it was formidably guarded indeed: the crossbow-and-halberd guards were all hand-picked fighters, tough and well seasoned, their morale stiffened by good pay, decent treatment, and the prospect of fighting side-by-side with warriors of the ilk of Farlorn, Stillhawk, and Zaranda herself.

The menace it did present to the world was sufficient. Across a turbulent life, Zaranda had observed that predators, whether two-legged or four or more, preferred prey that could be taken with a minimum of risk. Though there were a few tense heartbeats during which Zaranda palmed one of the resinous pellets used in her fireball spell, the large mounted party had scrutinized the caravan with some care and then ridden away.

At least half a dozen times they saw to left or right tall spires of smoke rising into the pale sky. On occasion, Zaranda clamped her jaw shut and set her eyes on the road ahead. She hated those who preyed on intelligent beings, but there was nothing she could do.

Until now, with trouble lying athwart her path. Goldie had pricked up her long, pointy, well-shaped ears, of which she was exceptionally vain. "Louts," she said with authority. "Perhaps a score. Half a mile along the road. From their yelping it seems they harry someone—or *thing*—like a pack of hounds, not quite daring to close."

Father Pelletyr looked skeptical. "Now, Golden Dawn, dear, prevarication is a sin. How can you tell so much more than our seasoned scout?"

"Because she has ears like the lateen rig on an Amnian fishing felucca," supplied Farlorn. "She ought be able to hear a fly fart at that range."

Goldie cast him an aggrieved look.

Stillhawk signed, *She's right*. He had his bow across the pommel of his saddle, but hadn't taken an arrow from his quiver. He seemed satisfied that, whatever the disturbance was, it wasn't coming their way.

Zaranda ordered Balmeric and Eogast to get the beasts off the road and into a defensive circle in a field of yellow and white spring flowers. Before she could hear their complaints at the exertion, she wheeled Goldie and was trotting forward again. "Let's go see what transpires."

"Must you always rush headlong into potential peril, Zaranda?" the cleric asked despairingly.

"Yes," she said. "Besides, some poor soul may need our help."

"Oh," he said. "Oh." And he twitched the flanks of his ass with a little green-leaved twig he'd picked up for the purpose, urging the creature to follow Zaranda, who'd set Goldie into a rolling lope.

"That was manipulative, Randi," said Goldie, who wasn't really exerting herself at this pace. "And you say *I'm bad*."

Zaranda frowned briefly, then shrugged and laughed. "It was easier than debating with him," she admitted. "At least this way I'll know where he is."

Their only contact with the Zazesspur road had been Zaranda's side trip into Ithmong. As one of only two major east-west routes through Tethyr, it was well maintained and relatively easy faring. For that reason it also attracted much attention from brigands. Zaranda therefore kept her train to the back roads, despite the fact some were scarce better than wagon ruts or goat tracks.

They were on a somewhat better stretch of road here, a country lane that showed signs of having been improved in the past by being metaled with streambed gravel. Stillhawk rode protectively thirty paces in the lead, longbow ready in his hand. Then came Zaranda, with Farlorn to her left, and finally Father Pelletyr, ass trotting furiously to keep up, cleric and beast alike grunting softly in time to the impacts of its sharp little hooves.

A round mound of hill rose to their left. A lone pecan tree sprang from the top, its roots gripping earth just on the far side of the crest. As the road bent around the hill's base, the clamor of excited voices grew louder, and then the riders beheld a crowd of angry peasants wielding sticks, farming tools, and the odd wolf-spear, confronting a lone figure that stood at the base of the lordly pecan.

Powerfully built, with short bandy legs, the lone figure wore a gray cowled cloak despite the day's warmth. In either hand it clutched a short, heavily curved blade. With these it was fending off the halfhearted thrusts and blows of such mob members as sporadically worked up the nerve to close with it.

"Slay the beast!" peasant voices urged from the back of the mob. "Slay the vile thing!"

Stillhawk slipped from the saddle and let his reins drop. Well trained, his bay would not move from where it stood unless it were threatened or summoned. He nocked an arrow. Farlorn frowned.

"Something about that shape I dislike," the bard murmured. His yarting was slung across his back. "And the cast of those blades—"

The cowl fell back to reveal the hideous tusked face of a great orc—an orog.

"Stand back!" the orog roared in guttural but clear Common. At the crown of his pumpkin-shaped head, he wore a steel skullcap polished to a mirror finish. "Can you not see that I serve Torm?" With the taloned thumb of his left hand, which still clutched his scimitar, he hooked a chain hung around his neck and drew forth a great golden amulet. On it, the upraised gauntlet of the god was clearly visible.

"Lies!" the peasants cried, their voices like raven calls. "Deceit! It's a trick! Kill! Kill!"

By reflex Stillhawk drew back his string. "No!" Zaranda screamed.

The ranger loosed. The arrow hummed to strike the tree a mere handsbreadth above the orc's sloped skull.

The impact rang as loud as a hammer blow. The crowd fell abruptly silent, staring upward at the black-fledged shaft as it vibrated with a musical hum in slow *diminuendo*.

The orog's small bloodshot eyes never wavered. He seemed to be gazing raptly at the Torm medallion.

"The unsanctified beast!" Father Pelletyr said in a shocked whisper.

"Amazing his claw doesn't burst into flame from contact with a holy object! Of course, Torm is a most warlike god. Perhaps he has less sense of the niceties. . . ."

"And perhaps we oughtn't leap at conclusions, Father," Zaranda murmured, "lest we find them illusions, concealing an abyss." She nudged Goldie forward with the gentle pressure of her knee.

The crowd turned their heads to stare as one at the newcomers, as if they comprised some great mechanical toy. The throng's leader, a thickset gold-bearded peasant with a hooded orange mantle and no left arm, brandished the rust-spotted sword he held in his remaining hand.

"What mean you interfering thus, strangers?"

"What exactly are we interfering in?" Zaranda asked, reining Goldie to a halt just shy of the edge of the crowd. The peasants muttered ill-humoredly but edged back away from her.

The bearded swordsman's brows twitched, as if he found it unseemly to have his question answered with another. But the intruder was an imposing woman, who did not give the impression that *her* sword blade would show any rust at all.

"We have caught this monster attempting to cross our lands," he said.

"We're in the process of extirpating it. And that's our right as human-born servants of the good and lawful!" He finished his little speech as a peroration to the crowd, turning and holding high his sword to shouts of acclaim.

"Is that what you're doing?" asked Farlorn in his ringing baritone. "You look more like a pack of starveling curs trying to work up the nerve to snatch food from a chained bear. Still—" he shrugged—"don't let me stay your hands."

"But I intend to," Zaranda said, quietly but clearly. "At least until I get to the bottom of this."

That brought angry catcalls from the mob. "By what right?" Yellowbeard demanded.

"By my right as a human-born person who intends to go on behaving as one."

"Do you threaten us?" asked a skinny man with a missing front tooth and wild black hair that continued without interruption down around his jaw in an unkempt beard. He was in the middle of the pack, safely behind the front rank.

"I'll not sit idly by and watch injustice done."

The crowd's noise level was beginning to rise; so, visibly, was its collective blood pressure. It is a fascinating sight to watch, Zaranda thought in a detached way. Like a pot of water about to come to a boil. Farlorn's remark had been explicitly insulting, but so vast was his charm and so disarming the manner in which he uttered it, the crowd had not been able to take offense . . . with *him*. Now their wrath was about to burst out at a different target.

The black-bearded man stooped and seized a chunk of basalt as big as two fists. "You cannot drop us all!" he screamed, cocking a twig-skinny arm to throw.

Zaranda brought her left fist to her hip, palm up, then thrust it toward him. As her arm reached full extension she rolled her hand over and flung it, as if pushing him with her palm from twenty feet away.

The man doubled over with all his breath gusting out his mouth. He flew backward several feet and fell in a moaning ball of misery.

The crowd grew very still. "And there's a lesson about the making of assumptions," Zaranda said. "Which will have no lasting ill effects—if he behaves himself. It boils my blood to see one beset by many."

"Even when that one is evil?" a subdued but surly voice said from the back of the crowd.

"What *really* angers me," Zaranda continued, "is to see one condemned not for what he does, but for what he is. I prefer to reckon on the basis of deeds, not prejudice."

She gestured at the great orc, who had allowed his medallion to hang before his chest, glinting in the sun. He held his scimitars slanted downward toward the grass at his feet, in a posture implying readiness but no threat.

"He carries the sign of the god Torm. Would a base creature do that?"

The mob looked at its one-armed leader, who had grown quite ashen behind his blond beard—an unpleasant blend of colors, Zaranda thought. He chewed his underlip and frowned in concentration.

Zaranda took a quick look around. Stillhawk's obsidian-flake eyes were fixed on the orog, and his expression was dead grim. Of course, his expression was *always* grim, but none other of her acquaintance had half the reason for hating evil things in general and orcs in particular as the mute ranger did. For Farlorn, hating orcs was a part of the natural environment in which he'd been raised, like woods and air and song. Yet his Wild Elven kinfolk held scarcely a better opinion of men than orcs, so the bard had some experience in keeping his prejudices on a tight rein. His flawless features were set in a half-smile that Zaranda knew well, and not altogether fondly, as his neutral look, behind which any feelings might lie coiled.

Father Pelletyr was a study in perplexity. The muscles of his face were working beneath his pink skin like fruits and vegetables shifting in a market bag. He had given life and soul to Ilmater, who, while a gentle god, was a fixed and formidable foe of evil. And orcs in his experience—and everybody else's—took to evil as a salamander to fire.

But there, unmistakable, on the great orc's breast shone the gauntlet of Torm. No normal orc would dare display that symbol in such a way, even as a

trophy, for fear of retribution from his own dark and jealous god, or even Torm himself. Torm was a lesser power, far less potent than his rival battle-gods Helm or Tempus or his own master Tyr Grimjaws, the Lord of Justice. But for that reason he was reputed to take a far more immediate and personal interest in the doings of his worshipers than other gods, if only because he wasn't spread so thin.

And Torm was a god of Law and Good, even as was martyred Ilmater himself. Father Pelletyr did not serve him, but must honor him. A true servant of Torm was the cleric's brother, not so close as a devotee of Ilmater or another member of his own order, but a brother withal.

The father, who was a good man but not unduly sophisticated, was visibly having difficulty reconciling himself to the notion of clasping a giant snaggle-toothed orog to his breast.

"But what does it *want* with us?" a voice asked plaintively from somewhere in the throng, whose individual components were now doing their best to blend into an undifferentiated mass behind their leader. The one-armed man was clearly discomfited by his position now.

"Why don't you ask him?" asked Goldie, around a mouthful of grass she chomped.

The peasants stared at her with saucer eyes.

Thanks, Goldie, Zaranda thought. That's just what we needed—new strangeness to tweak the raw nerve-ends of these folk.

The mare, who could not really read Zaranda's thoughts but often seemed to, swiveled her ears briefly back to bear on her rider in her own equine equivalent of a wink.

The man with one arm was clearly on point, here, with no graceful way to weasel out. He looked down at the rusty broadsword in his hand as if unsure how it came to be there, thrust it through his leather belt, provoking a twitch at the corner of Zaranda's eye at the heedless way he put various of his parts at risk. Then he turned to the orog and cleared his throat.

"Uh, pardon me, ahh—" a sidelong glance at Zaranda "—Sir Orog, and would you mind telling us what business you have coming into our country?"

The orog turned his two small bloodshot eyes to bear on him. The blond-bearded man quailed but held his ground.

The orog thrust his swords into gleaming bronze scabbards crossed over his back and threw back his cloak. The crowd gasped. Beneath he wore a steel breastplate, enameled white, with the sign of Torm worked upon it in gold.

"Passing through it, nothing more," he said in a voice like a blacksmith's file on a horse's hoof. "I am a simple pilgrim on a holy quest. I ask nothing of you save that you let me walk in peace."

"Who are you . . . pilgrim?" Zaranda asked. She found the word fit strangely on her tongue, and was shamed.

"I hight Shield of Innocence," the orog said.

Farlorn cocked a sardonic brow. "And were you born with that name, friend?" The word *friend* dripped sarcasm as a Shadow Thief's knife dripped poison.

The great orc shook his bulldog head. "What I was called before is of no consequence," he said, his speech slow and measured as if somehow painful. "The god remade me when he called me into his service. I am Shield of

Innocence now. I am Torm's paladin."

Paladin! The crowd gasped again—an effect Zaranda was getting mightily sick of. Father Pelletyr gasped as well and clutched at his Ilmater medal. Stillhawk made no sound, showed no reaction in face or posture, but the knuckles that gripped his bow showed white through his boot-leather-dark skin.

"Oh, really," said Farlorn with acid sweetness. "And here all this time I thought only true men could be paladins."

"I know little of such things," Shield of Innocence declared. "I was unworthy—all are unworthy. Yet the god chose me. His hand lifted me up and remade me. Perhaps because I was unworthiest of all. I cannot question the will of Torm, praised be his name."

The crowd found articulate speech again, or at least as close as mobs get:

"Lies!"

"A trick!"

"The monster seeks to deceive us!"

"Blasphemy!"

The gold-bearded man stood taller, more from swelling with outrage than straightening with courage. "The only meet penalty for falsely claiming to be a paladin," he declared in a choked voice, "is death."

"If it is Torm's will that I die," the orog said, "I die. I will not raise my hand to smite you."

Zaranda swung down off her mare.

"Are you leading with your chin again, Randi Star?" Goldie asked.

"My nose," the warrior woman said. "That's how it got broken the first time." She patted her steed on the neck and walked up the hill toward the tree. Yellow-beard stared at her with eyes bugged as she walked within arm's reach of him, but made no move to stop her. The crowd shifted uneasily behind him.

Zaranda stopped a pace away from the orog and stood facing him. Though she kept her face calm, inside she was vibrating like Stillhawk's arrow after it struck the tree. It was easy for her to talk about tolerance and forbearance, but she had had extensive dealings with orcs, none of them pleasant. Now she stood near enough to the great orc to smell his breath, and her impulses were to vomit, flee, or run him through.

So what are you, Zaranda? she asked herself. Animal or woman? Do you follow your instincts heedlessly, or do you follow where your reason leads?

There was a time to be ruled by instinct, she knew, and had survived tight situations accordingly. But now was the time she must master herself, or lose all form.

She forced herself to look the orog in the eye. They were blue and surprisingly clear. Like a pig's eyes—but no. And a pig was no evil thing, nor unclean left to its own devices . . . but these were not the eyes of an animal. Nor were they the eyes of a creature of filth and darkness. They seemed to shine with inner purpose.

Can you really read a soul through such windows? she wondered. You know better, Zaranda.

His carriage, though erect, was not orc-chieftain haughty. Rather it seemed . . . noble. His breath, surprisingly, was not foul. It was as clean as any man's, likely cleaner than any of his tormentors'. She raised a hand to his face.

And stopped, as if an invisible shield repelled her. His skin was orc's skin, gray-green and coarse, almost pebbled in texture, although it was scrubbed cleaner than the skin of any orc she'd seen. Her fingers trembled like small frightened animals longing to flee.

The question now isn't what he is. It's what you are.

She touched his cheek.

The crowd gasped a third time. "Zaranda!" Father Pelletyr exclaimed.

"Zaranda," Farlorn said, in tones suspended between regret and disgust.

With mongoose abruptness the creature caught her hand in both his claws. Now you've done it! she thought as her free hand darted to her dagger-hilt. She could feel Stillhawk drawing his elf-bow behind her.

The orog dropped to his knees, still clinging to her hand. The great head hung.

"You are my mistress," he said. "I shall serve you."

"What?" Zaranda said.

He raised his hideous face. Tears glistened in his eyes. "You have been sent to me by Torm," he said. "You are the one I must serve."

"Tell me," Farlorn said. The light of the campfire shone in his eyes and his fingers played like glum children on the strings of his yarting. The great orc stared at him with dog fixity. "You say the god Torm named you Shield of Innocence and set you to protect the innocents of this world from unjust attack."

The great tusked head nodded.

They were camped, with the owner's permission, in an olive grove half a day's journey at a pack mule's plod from the walls of Zazesspur. They might have pressed on and arrived after dark; there was traditionally little effort made to seal the city after sunset, and anyway the outer walls had suffered many breaches after the fall of the royal house.

But the travelers they met on the high road from Ithmong had shadow-haunted eyes and unsettling tales of nighttime Zazesspur. Zaranda could not have said why she, who had faced the darkest magic and hordes of undead in Thay, should be so fearful. The darklings were fearsome enough to normal folk, but by all accounts, nothing she and her comrades could not handle—though they were said to be growing stronger in nature as well as numbers. But the dreams kept coming, and they were getting worse. Zaranda decided not to drive weary men and mules on to their destination, and that was the end of it.

She had chosen the grove for poor Stillhawk, who languished in cities as a free spirit might in a cell. He could use a final night beneath sky and trees. Also, camping off the road rather than staying at an inn would give strangers small scope to look at the cloaked figure of the warrior who bore two curved swords across his back.

Now Stillhawk sat as far away from the orog as he could, across one of the two fires they had built—the other being for the muleteers and guards, who were given to muttering darkly and keeping hands near hilts when Shield of Innocence was around. Father Pelletyr sat on Zaranda's far side from Shield, protectively near, though whether to shelter her or be sheltered by her in the event of trouble Zaranda could not say. For once he showed small interest in his food.

Farlorn, though, sat near the orog, strumming his yarting and plying him with questions. His tone was feather-light, deceptively so.

"Ah, yes," the bard said with an air of satisfaction that put Zaranda instantly on guard. "Did it never then occur to you that, when those villagers beset you, *you* were the innocent one, suffering wrongful persecution?" The orog's heavy brows beetled until his shocking water-blue eyes nearly disappeared. He sat staring in silence into the flame-dance. Finally he shook his great head.

"No," he said. "I did not think of that. If I had, I would have had to kill them."

The bard flipped his hands in the air like copper-colored birds taking flight. "And there you have it! The beast's not to be trusted, I tell you."

Zaranda scowled. "You led him into a trap with your wordplay," she said. "I can scarcely condemn him for that."

"If his intellect were the world's brightest light," said Goldie from just outside the firelight, "we'd all be learning to navigate by sound like bats."

"You certainly have the advantage on the rest of us in that department," Farlorn said cheerfully.

Goldie pinned her ears at him, seeking some retort.

"Weren't you eating your oats, dear?" Zaranda asked.

"I finished them. Such a paltry handful." She sniffed.

"They're all I dare give you," Zaranda said. "You're getting fat."

The mare sniffed, turned away, and flounced off into the night—the effect Zaranda desired. In serious counsel, the mare offered sound advice, but her contributions were rarely helpful in debates of this nature.

"He's a monster, Zaranda," Farlorn said, quietly intense, gesturing at the orog, who squatted impassive as an idol with clawed hands resting on his thighs. "No matter what he claims. And if he's had a religious revelation, what of it? His nature will get the better of him in the end. He'll work us harm; you'll see."

Shield showed no sign of response. It struck Zaranda as heartless to be discussing him as if he weren't there. But she'd long learned she had to bet the dice according to the spots they showed.

She looked to Stillhawk. The ranger had little taste for argument. But when she would not look away, he signed, *He is a creature of evil. Once an evil creature, always one.* And he rose and stalked away into the night.

"And what of you, Father?" asked Zaranda in resignation.

The cleric frowned, almost as if in pain. "I have been praying for guidance in this matter," he said. "He seems sincere, and his bearing is that of a paladin—even I cannot deny that."

Farlorn snorted and waved a hand in disgust.

"Yet I cannot bring myself to accept that what he says is true," Father Pelletyr went on. "It comes to me, though, that I might make use of the power holy Ilmater has vouchsafed me, whereby I may divine where his heart really lies, for good or ill."

"No!" Zaranda was on her feet with cheeks flushed.

"I'll have none of that!"

"I am willing to submit to any examination, Zaranda," the great orc said, "if it will help me continue to serve you."

"I'm not willing! A man's thoughts are his most private possessions—an orog's, too. It's obscene to pry them from him with magic. And I don't want you serving me."

The orog sat unmoving. Father Pelletyr looked pained.

"But child, such powers of divination are granted by my god. They must be good."

"Can't a cleric use such powers for ill if he chooses?"

The cleric nodded, but his eyes were boiled pearl onions of shock. Zaranda dropped her gaze and raised a conciliatory hand.

"I'm not accusing you, Father. I'm merely trying to point out such powers are not intrinsically good nor bad, no matter whence they spring. I'm not sure that I buy that a thing can be considered good just because a god does it, anyway. If that's the case, why aren't we all votaries of Bane?"

"B-Because he's dead?" squeaked the cleric.

"Cyril then. I'm just saying I've had it to my eyebrows with gods and powers, whatever their ilk. I don't get my destiny from the stars, and I don't get my values from *them*."

"So you're saying you won't drive the fell creature from our midst?" demanded Farlorn in a voice like a yarting string frayed to the point of

breaking.

"Indeed," Zaranda said. "And I must say it does my heart good to hear genuine emotion in your voice, Farlorn. Even if it is anger."

The bard made an inarticulate sound, jumped to his feet, and huffed off into the dark. A few moments later Zaranda heard an equine snort and a flurry of hoof-beats as the half-elf rode his dapple gray away.

"He'll be back," Zaranda said, massaging her temples. She wondered whom she was reassuring. Probably me.

She glanced at the cleric, who was still staring at her as if she'd cast off her clothes and started turning handsprings. "Everyone else is going off to sulk," she said. "To save you the trouble, I'm going, too."

She marched into her tent, dropping the flap behind her. As she began to disrobe, she heard a soft rustle outside. She froze, her mind instantly recalling exactly where her sundry weapons were at the moment. Then came a huffing exhalation of breath, and she realized that Shield of Innocence had seated himself like a watchdog outside her tent.

That brought a grim smile to her lips. Won't *that* cheer Farlorn when he comes back from his nocturnal pout.

"Don't stop undressing on *my* account," the brazen head said from the camp stool on which she'd placed it.

She seized the heavy artifact up under one arm, threw open its ironbound chest, and dropped it in.

"Wait!" the head exclaimed. "I can reveal secrets to you such as you cannot *rrmmmpph!*"

What she could not do with the secrets was lost in a muffle as Zaranda dropped a wadded blanket over the head's mouth. She slammed the lid shut and triple locked it. Then she went to bed.

* * * * *

"But I don't *want* to be served," Zaranda said for what seemed the ten dozenth time.

The orc—orog, in truth—trotted along beside Goldie on his bandy legs, apparently tireless despite the heat and the weight of his armor. Horses raised by men or elves had to be specially trained to abide an orcish rider, even a very clean one. Not surprisingly none such had been available. Fortunately the plodding of the heavy-laden pack mules kept the pace down.

"I must serve someone," said Shield, also for about the ten dozenth time. "You were sent to me. It is the will of Torm."

Zaranda sighed. No less than Father Pelletyr, she had trouble believing he was really a paladin. Yet she was at least convinced that if there were deceit to his claims, it was a deceit he practiced on himself.

Zaranda Star had little knowledge of paladins or paladinry. Though she had always fought for what she thought was right, the paladin life-path had never appealed to her. Shield did display certain characteristics of the breed. He was uncommon strong, being able to tie tenpenny nails in effortless knots with those black-taloned fingers, and he radiated a quiet force of personality that his ceaseless deferring to her did little to mask. He must have been a formidable war leader indeed among the orcs. Unless of course that gift was the result of whatever revelation had changed his life.

He wasn't very bright, as Farlorn had demonstrated the night before, which meant that debates such as this one were exemplars of futility, inasmuch as

they always ended with his retreating behind a stout palisade of "It is the will of Torm" and refusing to budge.

So who's the simple one, Zaranda? a voice asked inside her mind. She sighed.

They crested a rise and there before them, still blue with distance, the spires of Zazesspur floated in a pool of haze.

"It's beautiful!" exclaimed Father Pelletyr, who had never been to Tethyr before.

Even Zaranda felt her breath catch in her throat.

Shield stopped and stood with legs wide, seeming braced, gazing at the city. Then he nodded. "My destiny awaits there," he announced. "I shall die in that city. Torm has told me this." He seemed to derive satisfaction from his certainty.

"And dare we hope," Farlorn whispered, his breath tickling Zaranda's ear, "that it will befall sooner rather than later?"

Golden Dawn whipped her head around and snapped at the bard's thigh. His mount caught the motion and shied away. "Back that little trollop away from me," Goldie snarled, "or I'll bite a chunk from her rump, you pimp."

Farlorn laughed as if in delight.

"Goldie!" Zaranda said reprovingly, but she was too angry with the half-elf to put much weight behind it.

What's happening to us? she wondered. Is there really something dreadful in the city, drawing us in? She shuddered but kept on riding toward the far-off towers.

* * * * *

A couple miles from the walls, Zaranda ordered the caravan off the main road one final time. That provoked the usual whining from Father Pelletyr, as well as an unusually vehement outburst from Eogast, who tore at his beard, stamped his feet upon the ground, and swore fearsome throat-tearing dwarven oaths that he had never in all his centuries known of so much pointless lollygagging.

"The less used the entry," she explained patiently during a breath break in his tantrum, "the less we'll have to pay in bribes to gate guards and bureaucrats—and the larger the shares when we pay off."

As expected, an appeal to avarice soothed Eogast's dwarven heart and stilled his outcries. Nonetheless, his outburst had held more than the usual edge. Leading the caravan down a brushy defile toward a breach she knew of by the old Dung Gate, she wondered if he shared her growing misgivings about their imminent arrival in the city.

Stillhawk rode knee-to-knee with her. They were under the loom of tall buildings and the wall, which was here twenty feet high. The ranger kept casting apprehensive glances up at the masonry pinnacles.

I don't like this, he signed to her.

"I understand," she said. "We're a long way from your native woods." Stillhawk was never comfortable in or even near a city. Surrounded by walls of wood, brick, or dressed stone, he always felt as if he were caged, even if he were walking in a broad open plaza. He tolerated exposure to cities from his long comradeship with Zaranda. She in her turn tried not to drag him into them any more than necessary.

She might indeed have left him outside the walls while she took the

caravan within and tended to business. That was their usual operating practice; he could certainly shift for himself, even in strange countryside, and he trusted her for his share of the payout. Not that he cared overmuch for such things.

Zaranda was not entirely sure why he stayed with her as her comrade-in-arms and, technically, her employee. He had a restless craving for action, and knew that where Zaranda went, action tended to follow. Her escapades provided ample opportunity to loose arrows and swing his sword against those beings that worked evil in the world. In a way, she sensed, his association with her tempered those cravings; had he not accompanied her, he probably would have devoted his life to a grim and bloody-handed quest for vengeance, exacting installments on a blood debt that could never be repaid. Stillhawk had enough wisdom to foresee the loss of his humanity caused by such obsession, to see that he would, in time, become one of the monsters he lived to slay.

Or so it seemed to her. Stillhawk was a man not much given to talking about himself.

It's not that, he signed. My heart is bad about this city, now. There is great evil here.

Which is why I want you beside me, she signed. I'm sorry to drag you between walls of stone, old friend.

She caught herself then, just on the verge of suggesting he stay outside anyway—which would be a slap in the face to his ranger pride. I'm beginning to feel the loss of sleep, she thought. It's starting to affect my judgment.

She wondered if Stillhawk's sleep was troubled, too. If he had had a dream he regarded as a vision, he would likely have told her. But if his dreams were like the ones that afflicted her, they were vague and formless, whispering darkness and dread—nothing clear-cut.

Zaranda thought of asking whether he was having nightmares or was simply edgy at the prospect of entering a city. She refrained. Vague as the dreams were, there was something personal about them, something obscene, so that in a way she could not define, she was ashamed to talk about hers, and reluctant to pry into his.

For a time she had wondered if the brazen head were somehow responsible, and whether she ought to cast the thing in a millpond. But no, if the head had the power to invade her mind with suggestive visions, she suspected they would be explicit rather than vague.

She looked around. Was Father Pelletyr yawning more than usual beneath his parasol? And the men: Eogast muttering darkly into his beard—nothing unusual about that—Balmeric with bags under his eyes so heavy he looked as if he'd already received his payout and drunk it all away. The guardsmen and drovers looked cagey. . . . Had they been dreaming too?

Shield of Innocence strode tirelessly at Zaranda's other hand, head high within its concealing cowl. He had expressed his own expectations clearly enough when he first caught sight of Zazesspur. His carriage suggested nothing of apprehension, as though he already accepted his fate, whatever it was.

Alone in their cavalcade, Farlorn rode with head and eyes clear. Seeing Zaranda swivel her head, he kneed his mare and interposed her between Stillhawk's bay and Golden Dawn, ignoring the warning way Goldie flattened

her ears.

"Why so somber, Zaranda Star?" he asked with a laugh. "Let me lift your spirits on wings of song."

She gave her head an almost convulsive shake. Normally she would welcome such an offer; clearly, hers was not a happy caravan right now, and the bard's songs did wonders for morale.

"Let it go," she said. She looked at him sidelong. "How have you been sleeping?"

"Never better. Desolate though this land is, it has a charm that soothes me. It's a far cry from my native woods, but after all, 'twas I who chose to forsake them."

"'Desolate,'" Zaranda echoed. Despite herself, she uttered a brief laugh. She had been thinking how green the coastal plains looked, after the interior.

Then she shivered. For all the cloudless day and heat, she felt a chill. Farlorn's senses are usually as keen as a hunting cat's, she thought. How can he fail to feel the menace? For all that he was able to pass effortlessly in human society, the bard had much of his mother's folk in him—and sometimes reminded Zaranda just how alien the elves really were.

The arroyo ran close to the foot of the ill-maintained wall. The caravan came to a section of bank conveniently collapsed near the gap Zaranda was making for. She sent Stillhawk and four of the more alert crossbow-men to make sure the entryway was clear and secure. Meanwhile she hung to the side with Father Pelletyr, who fanned himself beneath his parasol and discreetly watched Eogast chivy the heavy-laden beasts up the slumped bank. Though dwarves were not usually noted for their communion with animals, the art of mule-driving had been raised to a high degree in their mining operations; the chief drover's touch was sure, and when he wasn't being peevish he was amply supplied with the patience of his long-lived race.

The affair went smoothly, though Zaranda's heart skipped when the mule carrying the locked chest in which the head reposed slipped on the loose dun soil. She thought to hear a muffled curse and looked nervously around. None of the guards or muleteers gave any sign of having noticed anything out of the ordinary. Of course, it was well enough known that trickish things were likely to happen around Zaranda Star, so perhaps they heard it and thought nothing of it.

"Easy, Randi," Goldie muttered under cover of a lip-smacking sigh. "If you grip me any tighter, your knees will leave dents in my flanks."

"You're right," Zaranda said. She sucked in a deep breath and tried to force her tension out with it. She relaxed her legs and steered the mare up a slope littered with loose gray plates of shale to the breach in the city walls.

Eogast stood spraddle-legged just inside the hole, overseeing the mules as they came through one at a time. Though there was ample room to pass four mules abreast without rubbing flanks, he gave Zaranda a red-eyed glare as she walked Goldie through. She ignored him.

Inside the city wall she stopped and gazed about. The sun had passed the zenith, and already the block was shaded. The street was much as she remembered it. It was perhaps thirty feet broad, with greasy-looking puddles where Zazesspurians had swiped cobblestones for their own purposes. The buildings were of several stories each, displaying close-fit stonework, elaborate ornamentation around doors and windows and along rooflines, and

other signs of elegance.

It was the elegance of a corpse lying in state in some wealthy tomb. The facades of certain buildings had slumped to the street, leaving the long-gutted chambers behind exposed and looking uncannily like the eye sockets of skulls. Cornices and friezes had flaked off to lie in sad piles of rubble chips along the bases of intact walls. A stone rooftop gargoyle crazy-canted on its back favored Zaranda with a cynical wink from the nearby gutter.

"An uncanny sort of place," Father Pelletyr said as he rode up on his little ass. An eerie moan rang down the street. He jumped and made the crossed-hands sign of Ilmater to ward off evil.

"Why so nervous, Father?" asked Farlorn, riding by in apparent high spirits. "'Tis merely Sister Wind, blowing across a cavity in the masonry."

"What sort of person dwells here?" the priest asked.

"None," said Zaranda. "This was a wealthy residential district long ago, during an age when folk felt small need to dwell behind high walls topped with iron spikes or broken glass. When times became less orderly, it was the Street of the Seamstresses, and so it's called to this day."

"The only seamstresses I can envision at work here," the cleric said, "are the Norns who in legend spin, measure, and cut the fabric that is our destiny."

Zaranda laughed, alleviating a few nerves of her own. "The seamstresses left, too—at least the ones actually concerned with working cloth." The priest gave her a quizzical look. "Most recently the fine structures were houses of pleasure—not the finest of establishments, you understand, but of reasonable quality and great pretension."

"Ahh!" breathed the priest, as solemn and great-eyed as a child. "Thus the name Zazesspur the Wicked!"

"Well, Father, no. As with the term 'Empire of the Sands' for Tethyr, it's a misnomer, although I suspect one concocted deliberately by the city fathers to pump up the tourist trade from the north. Actually Zaz isn't unduly wicked as port cities go, though I grant you that leaves considerable latitude. This isn't Calimshan, after all; with slavery not tolerated here for generations, you'd be hard-pressed to find sin here that wasn't equally common in, say, Waterdeep."

The priest's face fell so far that Zaranda felt guilty for disillusioning him. "But is not prostitution legal here?"

"Indeed, and as a consequence it's a less rough and sordid business. Those who would patronize such establishments regardless can do so without consorting with the criminal element—or feeding it, either. Which is not to say it's respectable, Father; to this day, joy-girls and -boys are called *notch-tooth*, in honor of the days when they plied their trade in the old Thread-Biters' Lane."

The cleric brightened slightly—here at last was a lurid detail to relish. Zaranda shook her head and reflected that celibacy was a terrible thing—something she knew all too well of late.

With another round of extravagant dwarven oaths, Eogast chivied the last of the burden beasts safely through the breach in the wall. He strode forward, browbeating mules and men into line. In a chaotic city such as Zazesspur, moving in good order became essential.

"Why was the district abandoned then?" the priest asked.

"A water main burst, cutting off supply to the district. This was back during the Troubles, the rioting that followed the murder of the royal family. Folk had

little energy to tend to such details then, so the joy-houses moved out. Now the neighborhood's given over to rats." She glanced around at the doorways. "Not infrequently of the two-legged variety."

Goldie had her head up and was swiveling her impressive ears from side to side. "Ah, Zaranda," she said. "Speaking of those two-legged rats ..."

At once there were uniformed men all around. They materialized in doorways, in the blind-eye windows of derelict buildings, along rooflines. A party suddenly emerged to block the road while a second group stole from the rubble to prevent escape through the hole in the city wall. The ones on street level bore halberds with bronzed heads, while those above leveled cocked crossbows at the startled muleteers and their escorts. All wore gorgeous puffed royal-blue sleeves, blue pantaloons, bronze cuirasses, and morions of the Zazesspurian civic guard.

From the phalanx of halberdiers blocking the end of the street stepped a tall man in bronzed greaves, a scarlet egret plume nodding over his morion. He had a long face with a scar that ran from his right brow to the line of his jaw, crossing a dead, staring eye. The other eye was the near-colorless pale blue of northern sky.

"You are Zaranda Star, who styles herself Countess Morninggold?" he demanded in a harsh voice. One gloved hand rested on a rapier's swept hilt.

Zaranda urged Goldie forward to meet him. She was aware of Stillhawk riding at her elbow. She could feel the heat of his embarrassment at allowing the caravan to be taken so by surprise.

Rest easy, my friend, she signed to him. *Don't blame yourself. You're out of your element here.*

From the clot of halberdiers came alarmed cries, and the bronzed axe blades wavered as their bearers tried to make signs against evil while keeping grasp on the weapons.

"Desist from this magic hand-waving!" the officer rapped. "We know of you. Gesture more, and my men will pierce you like Waterdhavian cheese!"

Stillhawk growled deep in his throat.

"No magic," his employer said quietly. "I am Zaranda Star. Why do you block my way?"

"I am Cangaro, captain of the guard," the officer said, unrolling a parchment scroll. "In the name of the city council, I hereby impound this caravan and all the goods it carries!"

It had not been a day to improve her composure. The scar-faced guard officer's parchment declared that the caravan was being seized for unlicensed importation of magic artifacts into Zazesspur in violation of city council edict. Nothing she could say would dissuade him from executing it—and his troop of bravos had the drop on her own tiny guard force. Not that she would have fought, since she was trying to do business in an honest and aboveboard way.

The rest of the day gave her leisure to repent that choice. It had been spent in fruitless wrangling with officials in the slab-sided Palace of Governance in the city's middle, so new it was still under construction. There had been the usual block-faced indifference of officialdom: *No, you'll have to wait for things to take their course, like anyone. No, I can't help you.* There had also been the usual half-clever solicitations for bribes, with the odd sniggering suggestion—accompanied by a free wandering of the eye over Zaranda's wiry but very feminine form—that they need not be paid in gold.

Accustomed to dealing with bureaucrats across Faerun, Zaranda had paid such squeeze as she thought would prove useful—in gold on the desktop. The bulk of her resources, not to mention her hopes of keeping her home, were of course locked up somewhere in the city coffers by now, but she retained her private stash of coin, choice gems, and jewelry that she carried on her person and in Goldie's panniers for emergencies. Even after paying off the muleteers and escorts, she wasn't destitute. Yet.

But gold bought her nothing. Bribed or not, the council's lackeys could say nothing more than that she would have to wait for an administrative hearing. But the courts were busy. If a large enough donation to the council's grand plan to remake Zazesspur were forthcoming, the process might be expedited, and a hearing held within, say, three months.

When Zaranda left the palace in disgust, the sun was already dropping into the harbor. She became aware of a sense of unease that had been stealing, unnoticed, upon her all the time she had spent within the palace.

She shook her head in something like annoyance. I've always dreaded dealing with bureaucrats, she reminded herself. How could I be other than nervous, with my fortune resting in their hands? I mustn't let these cursed dreams get to me. On the spot she decided to go get drunk.

* * * * *

"Zaranda," the adventurer declared, leaning forward to bathe her face in the fumes of a less-famous Tethyrian wine, "your problem is that you're lowering yourself by playing at merchant."

Zaranda carefully set her own goblet of local red wine—of a somewhat more reputable vintage—carefully down upon the knife-gouged tabletop before her. She had come to the Smiling Centaur with Stillhawk, Father Pelletyr, Shield, and Farlorn, intending to drown her troubles in wine, a course of action that did little good. Now this scabrous mercenary was interfering with the process, and she didn't know whether to be angry or grateful.

"Oh, so, Valides?" she said neutrally.

The mercenary nodded with the exaggerated emphasis of the drunken. "Certainly so. How else could it be?" He belched and wiped the back of his mouth with a hand no cleaner but drier. "Look at yourself, Zaranda. You used

to be a warrior."

"I still am."

He waved a black-nailed hand, slopping wine from the leather jack over a much-spotted sleeve. "Now these merchants, you take them; they're just bloodsuckers. No better than vampires, I'm bound, even if their color's better."

He laughed uproariously, and moistly, at his own jape. After a while he noticed that his audience wasn't laughing with him. He quieted and leaned forward again.

"Merchants make nothing. They delve not, neither do they spin. But they rake off fat profits, yes they do! And for what? For nothing."

"For taking the effort and the risks in conveying goods to those who wouldn't otherwise see them," Zaranda said.

A hand wave. "Nothing, as I said. Now you take the warrior, though—there's a life that's honest and clean."

"You kill monsters and you take their gold."

"That's right! Yours is the right of the sword. You take what you will! By the sword!" He slammed his fist down upon the table. "*That's* the way for a man to live! And, uh, a woman like yourself, too, Zaranda. Not as some money-grabbing *merchant*."

Anger flared behind Zaranda's eyes. She felt her cheeks grow taut and hot. No, she told herself, you've always held that any being had the right to speak freely. You'd cut a poor figure if that went by the wayside whenever someone spoke against your liking.

She forced her hand away from the hilt of Crackletongue and smiled a grim smile.

Valides had become distracted by discovery that his jack was running dry, and he turned around to bellow for a serving wench. Zaranda scanned the tavern.

The Smiling Centaur was little different from any tavern one would encounter from the Sword Coast to the Vilhon Reach: a broad common room with low smoked rafters and tables and chairs of inexpensive but solid make to resist use by customers of greater than human size or strength, and misuse during bar fights. The place was lit fitfully by candles placed on wagon wheels hung by chains from the ceiling, and by oil lamps in stout, cagelike wrought-iron sconces on the whitewashed walls. An ox-roasting hearth gaped like a monster maw in one wall, but it was cold and dark; the evening was cool to the edge of crispness, but the day's residual heat and the warmth of bodies left no room for a fire.

It was crowded, but to her experienced eye, less than she might have expected on such a fine spring evening after a southern day more than amply hot to put an edge on one's thirst. The noise level was lower, too, as if the revelry were somehow subdued. Even the cleanshaven face of proprietor Berdak, the centaur who gave the place its name, seemed to be smiling less broadly than usual as he washed brass flagons behind the bar.

Now and then Zaranda caught a muttered reference to darklings, accompanied by nervous looks around, as if the night-stalking horrors might be lurking beneath tables nearby. As far as gossip informed her, the things posed small threat to those who went abroad in armed parties, which was not unusual for most of the Centaur's patrons. She thought there must be more to the almost furtive mood, the hollow, sunken eyes around her.

Or perhaps it was all Zaranda's imagination, energized by her own nightmare-induced lack of sleep and the day's events. But she had not survived such a hazardous life by taking aught for granted. She made a quick, careful survey of the immediate surroundings, reassuring herself that no one was taking undue interest in her or her four companions.

A serving maid appeared at the table, a young gnome with rather prominent pointed ears and a harried but pretty face that tapered from wide cheekbones to an almost elfin pointed chin. Valides snarled his demand for more wine like a curse, and when the gnome woman's hip accidentally brushed the table as she turned, he raised a fist to strike her.

Zaranda's hand caught him by the wrist, so quickly that it simply seemed to be there. He tried to pull away and turned a red-eyed glare to her when he could not. The serving girl scampered off.

Zaranda Star was one of those rare women who gave away comparatively little to men in the density of muscles, and thus power. The mercenary could have overmatched her strength to strength, with effort. The look in her eyes, now an almost self-luminous pale blue, and the name she had carved for herself with the curve-bladed sword at her side dissuaded him from expending the effort.

"Rest easy, man," she said. "What's got into you?"

He dropped his eyes, and she let him wrest his hand free. "These gnomes," he spat. "They infest the city like worms in cheese. Arrogant, clannish little beasts! They've long conspired to do honest human folk out of first their wages and then their jobs. But mark my words—Earl Ravenak knows what they're about. And he has the cure for their scheming."

"Ravenak?" Zaranda spat the word out like a shred of spoiled food.

Valides nodded, looking owlish. "The man with the plan; *he* knows what to do about all these outland scum, these refugee hordes and this inhuman vermin."

Valides was himself no native Tethyrian, but he plowed on before Zaranda had a chance to point that out. "We'll see a change when this Baron Hardisty comes to power," he declared. "Right now he claims to disdain Ravenak, to assuage the hoity-toity who lack the stomach for doing what must be done, if you get my drift. But mark my words—there's steel beneath that lace and frippery! This Hardisty has steel where he needs it. He'll back the Earl when the time comes."

"The baron may have steel where he needs it, but he's got muck in his brainpan if he has aught to do with that green slime Ravenak," Zaranda said. "Even in Tethyr it's a wonder he's not been hanged, noble or not."

Valides's drunk face began to cloud over.

"Now, Zaranda," Father Pelletyr said. He sat at Zaranda's left, where he had been occupied addressing himself to a leg of mutton. Restored, he took an interest in the conversation. "Your friend is entitled to his opinions."

"And I to mine," Zaranda said, leaning against the back of her chair and crossing her arms. The serving maid came back and set a fresh-filled jack before the mercenary. He glowered from her to Zaranda, cast a handful of coppers to her. She scooped up the empty vessel and scuttled away.

Valides swilled deeply, then glared about him. His eye fell upon a bulky figure stacked in the corner behind Zaranda, swaddled head to toe in a cloak. It was Shield of Innocence. Zazesspur was basically a tolerant town, though

Valides's talk made Zaranda wonder what it was coming to, but there were few places in Faerun in which an orog warrior would be made welcome. The Smiling Centaur attracted a lot of demihuman custom, and patrons of all races largely forbore to inquire into their fellows' antecedents, in the interest of avoiding scrutiny of their own. Zaranda had hoped he would attract less attention here than out on the street.

But Valides, though Zaranda's sometime comrade-in-arms, was one of those types with a gift for doing the least welcome thing. "What have we here?" he asked, heaving his somewhat squat form up from his stool and lurching toward the silent cowed figure.

Stillhawk stood up, too. With the closeness and clamor threatening to overwhelm his wilderness-honed senses, he would take neither wine nor spirit, and had been sitting quietly by Shield with a flagon of water and a platter of beef. Even here in the south, few would dare chafe a ranger of the Dales for abstaining from strong drink; it wasn't the sort of behavior one got a chance to repeat.

Though he hated and mistrusted the great orc, Stillhawk kept watch over him as a service to Zaranda. He moved to bar the inebriated mercenary's way.

But Farlorn Half-Elven reached out and caught his oak-hard forearm, staying him. "Bide, my friend," he said in his silken baritone. "Our comrade merely wishes words with our silent one. Wouldst offend a warrior true?"

Stillhawk blinked; Farlorn's words had a way of confusing him. Valides shouldered past him. "Hey, there, fellow," he rasped at Shield. "What breed are you? You're a big one—is it giant blood runs in your veins, or ogre?"

He put back his head and laughed uproariously at his own wit. Zaranda was standing now. "Vander," she said softly, using the ranger's rarely heard given name for emphasis.

The ranger nodded, turned. But now Farlorn stood between him and Valides. The bard's moods were like a pendulum, though without the predictability; from this morning's near-giddiness, he had swung into black despair. Unlike the others—Father Pelletyr's thirst was far less exigent than his hunger, though over the whole course of the evening he might acquire a pleasant illumination—Farlorn had drunk with single-minded concentration, fury almost, since arriving at the tavern. His exotically handsome face was flushed, and his eyes were red. He was laughing, but his laugh had a jagged, nasty edge, like a Shadow Thief's stiletto.

"What's the matter with you, fellow?" Valides demanded. "Too good to drink with us normal-sized folk? Show us your misshapen face, then, you great uppity oaf!"

He reached for the cowl of Shield's cloak. Zaranda prepared a spell that would, she hoped, douse all lights in the tavern, and for safety's sake tossed back her own cloak to clear Crackletongue. For all his elf-trained quickness, Stillhawk could not get past Farlorn in time to stop the drunken mercenary, and once Shield's tusked orc face was revealed, there would be a riot. And as ever, if blood must flow, Zaranda intended to be the spiller, not the spillee.

"*Sweet Ilmater!*" The tavern din had fallen low with anticipation. The choked outcry cut across the pregnant stillness like a full-throated scream.

Father Pelletyr had lurched upward from his chair. His face was suffused with blood and contorted as with agony. "My arm!" he gasped, clutching his

bosom. "My chest! The pain—"

He collapsed, upsetting the chair he had occupied. His flailing hand struck his flagon, and the wine stained his white robe like blood. Zaranda leapt toward him but could not catch him before he struck the rush-covered floor.

In a flash, Berdak was kneeling by the stricken man's side. Small for a centaur, the publican was solidly built, and with four legs for traction he cut through the mob like an Amnian racing dromond. He knelt beside the cleric and reached to feel his throat.

Then he looked up and shook his head. "His heart has given out," he said. "This man is dead."

"We know the face of our enemy," a voice echoed down the darkened streets of Zazesspur's Wainwright District, "*and we shall grind it beneath our bootheels!*"

A many-throated growl of approval answered him. Zaranda scowled and forced her hand away from Crackletongue's hilt. "What's that noise?"

Stillhawk stood at the corner ahead. He gestured right, toward the center of town. *It comes from this direction.*

She stalked forward and peered around the hip of a brick wall surrounding a wagonmaker's yard. Several blocks away a forest of torches upheld by a multitude of hands illuminated a mob below and a man above, standing on the pedestal of an equestrian statue that had somehow escaped the iconoclastic fervor of the Troubles, in the midst of a square. Even at this range the mob members looked shaggy and unkempt, and a questing breeze brought a whiff of stale clothing and unwashed flesh to Zaranda's nostrils.

"What is this?" she asked.

The four bravos she had hired from the tavern to convey poor Father Pelletyr's body, wrapped in a piece of canvas, to the chapter house of his sect took advantage of the pause to lower their burden—gently, with Shield of Innocence's still-cowled bulk looming over them—to the paving stones. One of them wiped his forehead of sweat with the back of his hand.

"From the sound of it, that's Earl Ravenak addressing his hairheads," he said. "This is thirsty work, milady."

Farlorn undipped a canteen from his belt and tossed it to the man. The man uncapped it, swigged, cast a reproachful look at the half-elf. "Water?" he asked plaintively.

The cleric's death had dropped the bard into a stony-sullen depression. He gave the man a look. The body-bearer hurriedly drank. Zaranda had scrupulously avoided bringing wine along, and made sure her hirelings hadn't. She didn't want them growing antic with poor Father Pelletyr.

"What's wrong with his followers?" Zaranda said. "They look like a passel of Uthgardt Beast Cultists coming off a half-moon binge. And smell worse."

A second bearer drank and passed the bottle on. "Hairheads," he said. "Ravenak's followers. They've vowed never to cut their hair nor wash until all foreign elements are purged from Zazesspur."

"*Gnomish blood shall spurt under the knife!*" the mad earl's voice raved, magnified by a speaking-tube. The crowd howled like banshees at a chariot race.

"May the black galleys carry off the lot of 'em," muttered the first man.

"Black galleys?" Zaranda asked.

"Zhentarim slave ships," the bearer said, then spat again, more lustily still. "They ply the harbor by night. I hear they put in at docks down in the catacombs beneath the city, to carry kidnapped children away into slavery."

"Mush-head," the third bearer said. "You believe anything you hear."

"It's true, may the sahuagin eat your guts! My Uncle Alvo saw them his own self."

"And what was your Uncle Alvo doing in the catacombs of a midnight?" inquired the fourth bearer.

The first man studied his sandaled toes. "Well... he fell down a manhole."

He'd had a bit to drink, all right? He's still as truthful a man as ever drew a breath of Zazesspurian air."

"Which means he's a liar approved," the second man said. The other two hooted laughter.

"Come on," Zaranda said, "before the Zhentarim dogs carry us all away." The bearers stooped to grab the corners of Pelletyr's winding sheet again. As they hoisted him to their shoulders with a soft grunt, it occurred to her she didn't know exactly who it was the bearer wished the black galleys to carry off: Ravenak and his fanatics—or the "foreigners" they inveighed against.

What's happening in Zazesspur? she wondered.

* * * * *

"My baby!" the woman wailed in a voice shorn of hope. "Give me my baby!"

The shuttered windows and blank-faced buildings around caught her words and tossed them, mocking, back at her. The short, twisted creature who had wrested her infant daughter from her showed her a smile full of teeth filed to points. The woman screamed and fought against the hands that gripped her arms, but it was fruitless.

She knew she should not have been abroad on the streets by night, but she had no choice. Her husband had been dead four months, innocent victim of a street fight between members of rival political factions. Since then, she had worked at a lamp-seller's stall in the Old Market to feed her infant. The merchant did not roll up his rug and bring in his wares until the sun sank into the harbor, and she had to finish sweeping up before she could go collect her child from her sister's house. Then she faced a long walk home through darkened, near-deserted streets. But she had always preferred the chance of an encounter with darklings to the certainty of slow starvation.

Until tonight. She had been within three blocks of the collapsing tenement where she rented a closet-sized room, and her steps had begun to quicken with the nearness of home, such as it was. Between that and trying to soothe her baby, who had awakened and begun to cry, the first she had known of her peril was when she fetched up against the broad, leather-armored chest of a vast being with a face as much beast as man.

By then she was surrounded.

The grinning horror examined her baby with apparent curiosity, as if unsure what it was. "Please," the woman begged, "don't hurt her. Don't hurt my baby!"

The thing looked at the child, shrugged, and tossed it to a snouted being about her own size. She had never seen such a creature before, but from the stories her grandmother had told her when she was young, she thought with sick terror that it must be an orc.

The orc caught the infant, held it up to peer at it in the cold, impersonal light of the stars overhead. The baby struck out with tiny fists and squalled. The orc tipped back its head, opened wide-tusked jaws to bite...

With a sound like a huge insect being stepped on, two handspans of curved sword tip jutted abruptly from its breast. Its caw of agony was drowned by a sizzling crackle as white sparks cascaded from the blade.

In its death spasm, the orc launched the child high in the air. Twenty feet away, a gaunt, pointy-eared woman who could only be an elf of legend drew a slim long sword and held it up to spit the infant. As the infant started down its arc the mother uttered a final, soul-lost scream, and fainted.

* * * * *

A hard brown hand reached up, caught the baby by one leg, and hauled it in. The elven woman uttered an inarticulate shriek of rage and lunged forward, raising her long sword to cut at the back of the impertinent man who had deprived her of her prey. Stillhawk tucked a shoulder, rolled with the baby clutched protectively against his muscular breast, and came up drawing his own sword.

Too late. She launched a cut that would split open the back of his skull—only to have her weapon ring against a slimmer blade that was hastily interposed.

Over the crossed blades, the tall, pale elf woman locked eyes with the fathomless brown eyes of Farlorn the Handsome. Then he snarled an Elvish phrase that meant *traitors die*. And suddenly his blade had disengaged and transixed her narrow throat.

All this had occupied no more than three beats of a danger-spiced heart. Zaranda tore Crackle tongue from the back of the orc she'd spitted, making it seem the creature bled white fire. She spun to face a stunted thing that plucked a short-hafted hammer from its belt and a sword-wielding human with wild, long hair.

From the corner of her eye she saw Shield of Innocence confront a hobgoblin as tall and great-chested as he. The creature raised a battle-axe both-handed above its bat-eared head.

The orog carried his twin scimitars, *Justice* and *Mercy*, slung across his back, with hilts jutting above either shoulder. He grasped these now, whipped the moon-curved blades up and out, and then across each other before him, severing both the hobgoblin's arms a span from the shoulders. Then he slashed backhanded with both blades at once so that they closed like scissors on the hobgoblin's thick neck. The creature's head sprang from his shoulders and went bouncing away over the cobbles.

"Neat trick," observed Farlorn, who was warding savage sword strokes from a bearded man as casually as if he were playing pat-a-cake with a halfling child. "I've not seen that one before."

Zaranda's human foe rushed her with an overhand cut then, and she had no attention to spare her comrades. She threw Crackle tongue up to parry the blow, stepping into the man at the same time. He was big and strong and might have beat her guard down had she only met strength with strength. Instead she turned and moved to her right, drawing her saber blade along his broadsword as if trying to cut it, so that the straight blade slid with a shrill song along its length to flash harmlessly downward past the hip.

She continued her pirouette—and her cut. Charging what he thought would be her unprotected back, the diminutive hammer-bearer ran right into a stroke that split his misshapen skull.

The human howled in a voice more like an angry wraith's than a man's, swung at her with a mighty two-handed blow that could easily have cleft her at the waist.

But such a stroke required so much windup that he might as well have sent a letter by post-rider warning it was coming. She danced back as the blade moaned by, sucking in her flat belly so that the sharp tip missed by inches. Then Crackle tongue lashed out in a counterstroke that laid the swordsman's right forearm open to bone.

The man howled again, but didn't lose his sword. He kept his grip with his left hand and raised the weapon to strike.

Zaranda spitted him through the chest. He uttered a final shriek, contorted face hideously underlit by the sparks leaping from the saber blade, and slumped.

Zaranda put her foot in his belly to tear Crackle tongue free, then spun, the still-sparking saber held ready before her. It was no longer necessary. Farlorn had dropped his second adversary, and Stillhawk had slain a darkling as well, still cradling the infant against his chest.

He walked up now to the mother, who had been flung aside by her captors when Zaranda slew the orc. She had spent the battle cowering against a wall. Now she stood with hands outspread on the masonry behind her, as if held at bay and ready to flee the ranger's approach. In his habitual silence he held out the baby, which had ceased to cry. She brushed a lock of dark hair from her features and stared from her infant up to Stillhawk's grim face. As though struck as mute as he, she reached up, touched lightly on his leathery cheek. Then she snatched her child and ran away along the lane.

The street was eerily quiet. No shutters opened; no inquisitive heads poked forth. That was unsettling in itself. Usually Zazesspurians would be hanging their heads out their windows at the sound of a street fight, cheering, jeering, and shouting advice like spectators at a sporting match. Of course, afterward when the city police came calling, no one would have seen anything.

But nothing happened. The whole affray might as well have happened in the derelict Notch-Tooth District. The citizens of Zazesspur had learned that the curious had more to fear than official inquisitiveness.

Stillhawk was going from darkling to darkling with a clip-bladed huntsman's knife in hand, "making sure" of fallen foes in the grim fashion of the Elven Woods. Zaranda was glad Father Pelletyr wasn't alive to see it; it would have distressed his good and kindly heart, though even he could not deny the necessity for it. The ranger's features were set in sterner lines than usual, and when he knelt by the small pointy-toothed creature whose skull Zaranda had split, he gestured his comrades near.

"What have we here, brave huntsman?" murmured Farlorn, who still had his rapier out. His eyes were bright, and his cheeks flushed; it appeared the killing had put him back in high spirits.

The ranger signed one word: *duergar*.

"A dark dwarf?" exclaimed Farlorn. "Ha! Impossible. Never do they venture up out of the Underdark."

"I certainly didn't bring the thing back in my pack from a dungeon crawl, Farlorn Half-Elven," Zaranda said. "I struck it down where now it lies, and though I've had the ill-fortune to see but one or two of that kindred before, there's no doubt Stillhawk has the right of it."

"But what can this mean?" Farlorn asked, shaking his head.

The darklings come from below, Stillhawk signed. *Why your surprise?*

"Because I myself slew a female Moon Elf," Farlorn said. "Rare enough to find an elf in company with a true dwarf. But one of the People leagued with a *duergar*?"

He shook his head, as if even he could find no words to match the strangeness.

"An orc and a hobgoblin lie slain with them, and likewise three who look as

human as I," Zaranda said. "Curious company indeed."

"There are many mysteries in the city," said Shield in his basso growl.

Farlorn looked at him standing there with the cowl of his white cloak thrown back and twin crescent blades clutched in taloned hands, and laughed.

"Indeed there are! And now I think on it, is this lot of darklings truly any more bizarre than to find a ranger and a half-elf fighting alongside a great orc?"

Zaranda looked up and down the street. It was still deserted. "We'd best be off," she said, "lest the guard find us and fine us for slaying darklings without a license."

The shrouded body of Father Pelletyr lay in the gutter a block away. The bearers hired from the Smiling Centaur had fled as the distraught mother's first cries reached them, knowing they meant darklings were about.

"We'll make no rapid going," Farlorn said. "The good Father's taste for good living has made him in death less bearable."

Shield of Innocence sheathed his swords and drew his cowl back over his head again. Then he walked back to the white bundle, stooped, and hoisted it over one broad shoulder.

"I shall carry the holy man," he said.

"So be it," Zaranda Star said; and so it was.

* * * * *

The chief cleric of the Order of Ilmater Brothers was a tall, gaunt man with a head shaped like a doorknob, a resemblance his surrounding fringe of gray hair did nothing to detract from. He still had sleep in his sunken, sad-looking gray eyes.

"So you have brought one of our own back to us," he intoned after the bundle had been deposited on a marble examining table in the healing chamber and the shroud was pulled back from Father Pelletyr's face.

"How did he die?"

"He died trying to prevent bloodshed, Excellency," Zaranda said, crossing her fingers behind her back. It wasn't actually a lie; the hapless father might have been trying to intervene when he keeled over. She couldn't know and chose to give her comrade the benefit of the doubt.

Examining the body, the cleric looked up beneath a bushy, upraised brow. "No need to call me 'excellency;' we are all humble brothers in Ilmater," he said. "He appears to have been stricken with an infarct to the myocardium. I see no signs of violence."

"Still, he was attempting to interpose himself between the combatants when death struck him down," said Zaranda, stretching the truth as far as it would go. It appeared to satisfy the archpriest, who nodded gravely.

"Long and well has our brother served Ilmater, and now the Crying God has called him home," he intoned.

Zaranda thrust a hand in her pouch and brought forth a handful of gems and rich broaches, sparkling in the light of the single lantern hung by a hook above the slab. "Here's what wealth I have remaining, Excel—ah, Father. I don't know whether it's enough to cover resurrection, but if not, perhaps we can make arrangements."

But the cleric shook his head. "Ah, my child, but you forget—" he began, wagging an admonitory finger.

"No terms on healing," Zaranda said, sagging. The gods of Toril were a cash-on-the-barrelhead lot. Given the uncertainty of fortune in that world, it

was probably wise.

But the archpriest was still shaking his head. "Our brother Pelletyr forswore resurrection from death when he took our orders. He subjected his will to Ilmater's. Now Our Martyred Father has seen fit to call him home, and he has gone to stay."

"So be it," rumbled from the hooded hulk of Shield, who stood behind Zaranda. The cleric cast him a curious look, but said nothing.

Zaranda's eyes squeezed shut. Father Pelletyr had been neither the oldest nor the best of her friends, but he had been a comrade of unflinching loyalty and great heart. A single tear ran down her cheek.

He's the first of us claimed by the evil that lies upon Zazesspur, she thought irrationally but with profound conviction. How many more?

* * * * *

Out on the street before the chapter house, Farlorn paused with hands on hips and swelled his chest with a deep draught of night air. Because it was spring, the nights were cool, not sultry as they would be when summer arrived in the Empires of the Sands. Soft lantern light shone through stained glass that showed Ilmater's bound hands on a field of butter yellow and made colorful play on the back of his doublet.

"And there you have it," he declared. "Poor Father P. eschews resurrection in order to lend meaning to his eventual martyrdom. And then what befalls him? He pops an A. and dies a death entirely meaningless. Who says the Crying God has no sense of humor?"

Zaranda turned, frowning, toward him, intending to take him to task for his callousness. Instead, she found herself breaking into laughter that she quickly had to stifle, for fear of scandalizing the inhabitants of the chapter house.

"Life is a witch, and then you die," she said, giggling like a schoolgirl. "Now there's a fine Ilmaterish touch for you!"

And she thrust her elbows out from her sides, so that Stillhawk and Farlorn put their arms through hers, and walked away down the street with Shield following in silence. And once they were around the corner from the Ilmater chapter house, Zaranda let her laughter boom forth full throated.

Because if she could not laugh at Death, how could she face it when her time came?

* * * * *

That night in her bed Zaranda did not laugh.

She had engaged rooms at the Winsome Repose, an inn of good if not preeminent quality. She still had treasure of her own, though far from enough to cover her debts, and saw no reason to stint herself. Stillhawk and Shield were bedded down in the stables, where Goldie could speak to the other horses in words they understood and gentle them to the smell of the oreg—and where Stillhawk could keep the mare from gambling with the grooms and cheating them, which was bound to draw undue attention. Zaranda had a chamber to herself, as, to his disgruntlement, did bard Farlorn.

Though the night had grown near-chill, she found herself unbearably hot, stiflingly hot, and could bear neither clothes nor covers. And as she tossed and sweated in a state that could be called sleep only because she was palpably not awake, it seemed to her that she heard the voices of lost children crying out to her, helpless and doomed, as black whips drove them in ranks toward black galleys, far below in the city's stone bowels.

And another voice spoke to her, whispering, at once infinitely repellent and infinitely seductive, saying:

Zaranda.

Join us.

Why fight it?

You know you shall come to us . . .

Soon.

"If you would know the source of your troubles," the amplified voice shouted, piping-shrill yet bearing authority, *"look to the wealthy. It is because they are rich that you are poor!"*

Outside the yellow brick smithy, a crowd roared approval. Artalos the armorer rubbed an oily hand on the front of his leathern apron, which was dotted with tiny char spots from the sparks that flew from his forge. "They can go on like that for hours," he said with something resembling admiration. "There may be aught in what they say; I lack the wisdom to know. I do know that when they speak of the rich, they include artisans and craft-folk like me. And if I'm rich, why do I sweat the daylight hours away, and still fall short when it comes time to pay my bills? Not to mention the taxes the city council exacts, and the dues the syndics demand."

Zaranda went to stand in the doorway. It opened on a yard in which there stood an anvil, a quenching tub, and piles of rusting ironmongery ranging from old plowshares to broken swords. A gate stood open in the high wall, into the top of which were set old sword tips, points upward like the leaves of a hedge, which surrounded the smithy yard. Through it she could see a small figure standing on a nail keg in the bed of a wagon parked where two streets crossed, addressing a large, rough-dressed crowd.

"Does every madman in Zazesspur possess a speaking tube?" she asked.

"And an audience," Artalos agreed grimly. "So it is coming to pass."

"Who's our diminutive orator?"

The armorer came forward, scratching his grizzle-bristled chin with his right hand, which at the moment was a black iron hook that he used to grasp the handles of melting pots. He had quite an assortment of cleverly wrought implements he could substitute for his hand, which had gone missing to a Tuigan sword during the nomad invasion years before. Likewise, the smallest two fingers of his left hand were gone, though he had not bothered to replace those.

"That would be Toby, or to put it formally, Tobiworth Hedgeblossom, of the noted Hedgeblossom brothers."

"'Noted'?"

"Noted indeed. Toby and his brother Putomas—called Poot by the vulgar, which of course includes most of his followers—are among the foremost of our local rabble-rousers. They lead the Social Justice League, which is among the foremost of our local rabbles."

"Rather in the fashion of Earl Ravenak?"

Artalos turned and spat with great accuracy into the open mouth of his forge, eliciting a hiss of steam. "Not quite. They don't preach outright murder—yet, though I fear their wild talk will lead them to that, inevitably, as rivers seek the sea. That carrion-breathed raver Ravenak not only preaches it—his minions practice it with a will."

He shrugged and went back inside. "Ill times have overtaken Zaz of late. Our own guild masters, the syndics, treat us more as chattel than craft-brothers—and I think we armorers and swordsmiths get off lightly since so many of us are veteran fighters and not to be imposed upon."

But will you *act* to defend your rights, any more than the weavers or soapmakers? Zaranda wondered. She forbore to ask since Artalos was an old

comrade, and she wanted further information from him.

Feeling the need for more information as to how the land lay in Zazesspur, she had gone abroad to talk with some of her long-standing contacts. She did so alone. Shield of Innocence and Stillhawk remained in one another's care back at the Winsome Repose, since they would be uncomfortable and conspicuous among the Zaz throngs. Stillhawk yet hated the orog as a crow hates an owl, but he would neither harm Shield nor suffer harm to come to him unless the supposed paladin acted treacherously; such was Stillhawk's devotion to Zaranda.

Farlorn was off on business of his own. Since they were back in civilization and his sporadic attempts to resume matters with Zaranda had been rebuffed, said business probably entailed seducing human women, a passion with him almost as great as his love for music and strife. Zaranda was just as happy for lack of his company. He had been a friend for a long time, and a fine companion on the road, but sometimes his dual nature bore down heavily on him, making him difficult to be around.

Toby Hedgeblossom's impassioned rhetoric followed Zaranda and Artalos into the shadowed forge.

"Likely one or the other of the Hedgeblossoms will get himself elected, and then they'll lose interest in redistributing wealth, save into their own pockets," the armorer said, working a bellows with a treadle. The glare from the open forge changed from orange to yellow. "Meanwhile, have you heard the latest tidings? It's said that the city council is considering making it illegal to bear weapons larger than daggers within the city walls—unless, of course, you happen to belong to the civic guard, or are some councilman's personal bravo."

"Will the folk of Zazesspur stand for that?" Zaranda asked.

The armorer shrugged again. "Ill times beset us. If it wasn't for the cogs and caravels plying in and out of the harbor we'd be as poor as the country wretches. People are saying something must be done." He shook his head. "Why they think that means doing just *anything* will help, though, is more than my poor head can puzzle out."

"What of the darklings? Many speak of them as the greatest menace, yet you've not mentioned them."

"The darklings are a fell lot, no question, and I fear they are harbingers of worse times to come. Yet they prey mainly on the weak and unarmed. They fall readily enough to swords wielded with will and skill, so I am told."

"So much is true," Zaranda said.

He looked at her a moment under lowered brows and laughed. "So! I should've known the redoubtable Captain Star could not pass a night in Zazesspur without crossing swords with our local plague. You ever drew trouble to you like a lodestone!"

"Thank you so much for reminding me."

With his hook, he reached into the forge and drew forth a crucible of molten steel, glowing white. This he poured into a dagger mold.

"I don't doubt this civic guard could clean the devils out with one concerted push," he said as he poured, "if there were anything to them but swagger. Still—" he set the empty crucible aside "—the darklings pose little enough threat to us, so long as we're allowed to keep our swords."

Having learned as much as she felt she could, Zaranda bade her old

comrade farewell. When she started out the gate, a symbol painted in the mouth of the alley caught her attention: a stylized eye with a brow slanting to meet it from above and two lines descending from it below.

"Artalos," she called. "A moment more of your time, if you will."

The armorer emerged, blinking, into the sunlight. "Always for you, Captain. What be your wish?"

"That sign there—you know it?"

He snorted. "Who does not know the dragon's-eye symbol of Nyadnar the Sorceress? Powerful she must be indeed to dare the wrath of those creatures by using such a sign. Yet you'd think so powerful a wizard would have better things to do than creep about the city scrawling on walls."

"Perhaps she doesn't do it herself."

"Who'd dare without her permission? I'd as lief scrawl Elminster's mark in a public urinal. Nyadnar's not his match, so it's said and so I believe; but there's something fell about her. I wonder if she's not a thing of evil, after all."

"She thinks herself above such concerns," Zaranda murmured. "So she's in residence currently?"

"In her house on Love Street," the armorer said with a nod, "or so it would seem. That mark was not there yesterday when the sun went down."

"Strange," Zaranda Star said, and took her leave.

From curiosity she wandered down Anvil Road to where it crossed Tinsmith Way, where the halfling firebrand addressed his followers from his wagonbed. Even here, in a predominantly grimy mechanical district, the upper floors where craftsfolk lived were alive with bright flowers in window boxes. The people of Tethyr, "wicked" Zazesspurians no less than the olive-growers and shepherders of the countryside, loved their gardens.

The flowers' brisk beauty was not mirrored in the street, where most of Toby Hedgeblossom's hearers were roughly dressed. That was nothing uncommon in Zazesspur these days. What was uncommon in this crowd were the thick calluses of workingmen's hands and the colored-cloth brassards of the guilds. Hedgeblossom addressed his spiels to the laborer, but it mainly seemed idlers who were drawn by his promises of free wealth.

Perhaps, Zaranda thought, the real workers of Zazesspur realize who'd have to *pay* for Toby's schemes. But no; likely the real laborers were occupied at their labors. The lure of money for nothing was hard to resist; why, after all, did so many follow the hazardous but not particularly labor-intensive road of the adventurer?

She smiled a taut smile, sliding through the crowd and turning her hips this way and that to avoid brushing anybody in a suggestive way. You're going to start having cynical thoughts about yourself if you aren't careful, girl, she realized.

Something brushed her left hand. Pickpockets were as common as potholes in Zazesspur. Zaranda was always alert, and her senses and reflexes both were fine. She spun, clapping her hand to Crackle tongue's hilt, thankful she secreted her coin at various strategic points of her person rather than leaving it to dangle from her belt like ripe fruit for the magpies.

A figure clad in a stained linen jerkin was moving purposefully but not hastily away from her. She could not pursue without jostling members of Hedgeblossom's audience, who were beginning to work themselves into an enthusiastic state. Nothing seemed missing; no point in giving chase—

Then she realized that, far from taking anything from her, the mysterious figure had slipped something into her hand, a papyrus scrap half-crumpled so that the coarse fibers were beginning to part. The words inked in it in a half-literate Common scrawl were legible enough: *If you want get back whats yurs, look fer the one-arm man at the Carpet Mart tomorro, wun bell past daybrek.*

She looked up sharply. The linen-clad man had vanished. Zaranda shrugged and stuffed the scrap in her belt. Separating herself from the mob—now being led in a chant of "share the wealth!" by Toby Hedgeblossom—she set out with long-legged strides down the Way, toward the Exotic Quarter.

* * * * *

The wizard's face was a twisted red mask glaring forth from white hair and disorder. "That's it," he said in a voice wound tight as a crossbow string. "Enough. Begone with you and your eerie pranks."

The girl could barely see him through her tears of hurt and anger and the red-hair tangles that hung unwashed before her eyes. "It was an accident," she said. Her lower lip jutted in what looked like sullen defiance, but was more an attempt to hold back full-blown sobs.

His self-control snapped like a crystal goblet dropped on pavement from great height. "Accident?" he screeched. He flung out a skinny arm in a gesture that encompassed the wreckage of his shop and made his voluminous sleeve flap most alarmingly. "*Accident!* You summon up a whirlwind to devastate my shop, and try to pass it off as *accident?*"

The walls of her own control gave way. "But I can't *help* it!" she wailed through a sudden flood of tears. "I don't know how to control the magic. That's why I want to learn!"

"Magic? This is no magic! Did you speak an incantation?" He was so close to her now that his spittle blended with the tears, making shiny runnels down her cheek and further matting the ends of her hair. "No! Did you use spell components?" He scooped a pinch of spilled particolored powder from a bench whose marble-slab top had proven too massive to be toppled by the whirlwind.

He threw the powder in the air and blew on it. It puffed into a tiny cloud, then each mote became a brief bright spark of a different color that dispersed and drifted off into the gloom.

"*No!* One moment there was nothing but a thumb-fingered aspirant to be my apprentice making poor work of sweeping the floor. The next—chaos!" He shook his head. His gray hair stood out on both sides of his balding skull like dispirited static discharges. "This was no magic. Magic is orderly and disciplined. Magic is something learned, something labored for, something *won.*"

He seized her by the elbow and marched her toward the door. "What you did wasn't magic. It was madness, or possession, or I-know-not-what. But it's not something I'll suffer near me!"

He threw open the door. From the afternoon street, the sunlight poured in like scalding water.

"Now get you gone," the magician declared, gripping the girl's arms both-handed to eject her. "And never let me see you again. Or I'll show you what magic really is ab—ouch!"

The last came out in a squall as light flashed and sharp thunder cracked. The mage jumped back, waving singed palms in the air. His dark eyes were

wide with shock and terror.

She stuck her tongue out at him and ran away down the Street of Misfortune Tellers.

* * * * *

"Milady," a young voice called, clear and fresh as springwater. "A moment of your time?"

Zaranda's long-legged impatient strides had carried her into a district where the upper stories of buildings jutted out to overhang already narrow, twisty streets, so that it seemed they leaned their heads together to conspire against the traffic bustling below. She stopped and turned, dropping her hand inside the knuckle-bow that guarded Crackletongue's hilt. The voice had sounded fair, but Zaranda had little reason to take for granted the friendliness of anyone she encountered.

Two young people were approaching her, a youth and a maid, he with hair as bright and yellow as summer sun, she with hair of lustrous pale brown falling in kinky waves down over her shoulders. Both were dressed as simply as the poorest peasant or artisan or mendicant, in white smocks belted at the waist with knotted rope. Yet the fabric of the smocks was shimmery stuff, white and evidently expensive to Zaranda's merchant eye; their hands were soft and pale, and she doubted the girl had been born with that delicate wave in her carefully tended hair. These, then, were children of wealth.

Such seldom had much use for rough-garbed adventuresses of Zaranda's ilk, her purchased patent of nobility notwithstanding—and naturally she did not walk the streets with an imp mincing after her, announcing to the world that she was Countess Morninggold. But their smiles were so friendly and open that Zaranda felt an urge to bundle them off the street before anyone saw them and took advantage of them.

"How may I help you?" she asked.

"We'd like to give you this flower," said the girl, holding forth a blossom as brilliantly blue as a civic guardsman's drawers.

"And what do you wish in exchange?"

The girl's face fell as if Zaranda had said something cruel. But her companion laughed a musical laugh. Like the girl, he wore a plain gold torque around his neck.

"You needn't speak that way," he said. "There's no necessity for payment. Please, lady, accept it as our love-offering."

"I've often found," Zaranda said, "that things called free often cost the dearest." But she suffered the white-clad girl to fasten the flower behind her ear.

"There," the girl said, stepping back with a smile. "You are even lovelier than before."

"Who are you people?" Zaranda asked.

"We are All-Friends," the boy said. "We serve and worship Ao the Universal."

"Ao?" Zaranda repeated, thunderstruck.

"We house the homeless and feed the hungry and go abroad spreading the message of Ao's universal love," the boy said.

"If you feel you must, you may make a contribution to our ministry," said the girl. "But we work and pray for a day when the needs of all are met by sharing, and no longer is there talk of buying and selling."

"I take it you've not heard of Armenides, then?" the old gnome said.

"No." Zaranda stood on tiptoe to study her reflection in an ancient warrior's mirror-polished basilisk-hunting shield, hung on the wall of the cluttered shop. "The flower looks good on me, does it not?"

"It does," the gnome agreed, blowing smoke from his pipe. He was dressed in a simple gown of emerald-green silk, with a stand-up black collar on which were embroidered dragons rampant in gold. He smoked a long, thin clay pipe. All his hair was white, including both of his bushy eyebrows, which was a pity, since it left no apparent sense to his name, *White Eyebrow*. In fact, when all his hair was black, his right eyebrow had been turned snowy-white by a brush with magic. "And the flower allows me to glimpse Zaranda Star's vanity, hitherto unsuspected."

She laughed without self-consciousness, examined herself a moment longer. "I'm vain enough," she said. "I can't always afford to indulge it, that's all."

She turned and propped her rump on a table in the clear space beside an ormolu clock. She paid it only cursory attention; though it was like nothing else she had seen on Toril, it was standard fare for the Curiosity Shop. Though White Eyebrow was no magician and scrupulously avoided trafficking in magic items, he cultivated extensive contacts among the better-intentioned of those who plied the dimensions in spelljamming ships. After all, to impress an inhabitant of Faerun as a *curiosity*, an object had to be curious indeed.

"So why this sudden fad for Ao?" she asked. "He's the preeminent god, I know, maybe the god the gods worship. But we mortals would be as well off venerating a tree stump, for all the interest he takes in us. He performs no miracles; he conveys no powers upon his priests."

White Eyebrow raised a scholarly finger. "And thus the tale leads us to Armenides the Compassionate, or the Pure, as he is sometimes called. He is spiritual advisor to our young Baron Hardisty. He came to Zazesspur a twelvemonth ago, claiming to bring a new dispensation from Ao. Ao has decided to take a more active role in the affairs of this world, Armenides avers. And he seems to have invested certain followers with the usual array of priestly powers."

"These All-Friends are priests of Ao, then?"

"Indeed not. Merely devotees who do good works in the god's name. Drawn from among the children of Zazesspur's first families, by and large, which I find good in and of itself. It gives the spoiled darlings something to occupy themselves with beyond their own selfish pleasure. But here, I forgot my manners." He hobbled to the rear of the shop, where despite the day's warmth he kept coals aglow in a small black brazier.

"I regret your loss, Zaranda," he said, setting a grille on the brazier and putting a copper kettle on to boil. "Yet perhaps it would be no bad thing, were magic banished from Zazesspur. It has brought much sorrow to the world. Perhaps it is best put away or reserved to wiser hands."

Zaranda frowned. Here was the heartmeat of a debate she and her old friend had often held before. "Put away all magic?" she contented herself with saying. "On a world such as Faerun? Easier to put away air."

He laughed. He had a merry, ready laugh, and round cheeks like apples

tied up in the laugh lines of his face. "Our old dispute rears its head again. Some things never change, or do so but slowly." Turning from the kettle, he puffed his pipe and blew three smoke rings of descending size. The middle one drifted upward through the largest, and then the smaller floated up through both so their order was reversed.

"I wish I knew how you did that," Zaranda said.

"First you have to smoke," White Eyebrow said, "pipeweed or this new Maztican herb, *tobacco*. Plus it helps to have a gnome's lifespan to practice over." He puffed again, more conventionally.

"What of this Baron Hardisty? Is he the same Faneuil Hardisty who fought as a captain in the Tuigan War?"

The gnome nodded. "Just so."

Zaranda looked thoughtful. "He was a good man in those days. A brave warrior, though perhaps too much inclined to trust in bravery and luck."

"Why do you say *was*? He seems a good man still. He refuses a seat on the city council, and so holds himself above the infighting that disfigures the politics of this city. Many people are heard to say he's just what the city needs—aye, and Tethyr as well. A strong man to take it all in hand again."

He laughed and shook his head. "I see you looking skeptical, Zaranda. Ever the rebel! Authority is not always the monster you believe it to be."

There came a rustle from the rear of the shop, and a musical tinkling. A gnome woman came through the hanging strands of silver bells that covered the doorway to the back rooms and the stair to the apartment above. She was small and slim by gnomish standards, and beautiful by the standards of human and gnome alike, though they did not often overlap. Her raven's-wing hair was parted in the middle and confined by a circlet of silver, on the front of which was fixed a tiny toothed wheel. She wore a saffron robe, and the brown sash around her narrow waist bulged as if packed with small hard objects of various shapes, marking her as a priestess of Gond Wonderbringer.

"Ah!" White Eyebrow said cheerfully. "The pot's just begun to whistle. Perhaps you could make tea for us, Simonne."

The gnome woman looked at him a moment, then moved to obey. "Greetings, Zaranda Star."

"Simonne!" Zaranda exclaimed. "It's good to see you. The last time we met you were scarcely more than a child."

"She's no more than a child still," the old gnome said, frowning slightly, "though she has given herself much to the doings of this new sect of Gond Thunderblunder, or whatever he is called, who seek to better the world by tinkering with it."

"We hope to make the world better by gaining knowledge of it," Simonne said, pouring tea into dainty porcelain cups with flowers painted on them. "We don't presume to tinker with that of which we know too little; that's *why* we seek knowledge. And surely nothing is gained by turning our faces from the truth!"

She distributed the cups from a tray. "Our folk are pressed hard. You who have long been our friend should be warned that you'll do yourself no good in this city by associating with us."

"That's strange news indeed," Zaranda said, sipping, "for though it has its share of vices, Zazesspur has never been an intolerant place."

"There is some new evil that invades our dreams and robs us of our sleep.

Many blame us for that—not to mention more earthly ills."

"What's this about dreams?" Zaranda asked sharply through the steam.

"Nonsense, is what it is," White Eyebrow said, puffing furiously. "A shared fancy, a passing fad. Folk have nightmares betimes, which they always have and always will; only the notion is abroad that there's some fell design behind it all, so that anyone who suffers troubled sleep must tell all his friends, and they too remember they have at some time known bad dreams; and so it all gets built up into some dark conspiracy of sleep."

With a tinkle of a different timbre, the larger bells affixed to the front door announced the entrance of customers. Though perhaps *customers* was the wrong word. Zaranda's fine nose wrinkled to a whiff of dirty hair and stale sweat as two young male humans came into the shop, shabbily dressed in black and gray, with hair hanging in their eyes in great unwashed clots. Short, dark-stained wooden cudgels hung from their belts.

Simonne's dark eyes narrowed. "Be calm, my daughter," murmured White Eyebrow. "This, too, shall pass."

He glided forward. "How may I help you, young gentlemen?"

The huskier of the two, whose hair was dark, laughed nastily. "It speaks," he said to his partner in mocking wonder. He put a hand against the old gnome's chest and pushed him reeling back. His friend, who was skinny and dark blond, giggled shrilly through a prominent nose.

"You and your foul kind can leave this city, if you want to help me," the husky boy said. "Nothing else will do, in fact."

He picked up a vase glazed a deep, lustrous blue. Tiny flecks of light shimmered, seemingly deep within its slick surface: gold and white and blue and red. When the youth turned it this way and that in his unwashed hand, the points of light shifted as if they flowed within the very finish—or like the constellations in the sky when one turned one's head.

"Now, my young friend," White Eyebrow said, "that comes from a far world, on a vessel borne on wings of magic. If you care to hear, I'll tell you of it—"

"I'm not your friend, rodent!" snarled the boy. "Magic! The source of all our problems, no?"

"Surely enough, Fredaro," his companion said, bobbing his head. "Surely enough."

"This reeks of magic," Fredaro said. "What will please me is to make an end of it." He raised it to the level of his brows and let it drop.

A slim but scarred hand caught the priceless vase before it struck the carpet-covered stone of the floor.

"Clumsy of you," murmured Zaranda Star, replacing the object on its shelf with her right hand. "But then, as careless of your appearance as you are, it need not surprise us, I suppose."

"Zaranda!" murmured White Eyebrow in alarm.

The boy's face purpled. "Bitch! I'll teach you to interfere." He raised a beefy fist.

"Will you?" She smiled, then pressed forward with her left hand. Color gushed from the youth's face as the tip of the poniard her hand held dug into his groin.

"I think not," Zaranda continued in pleasantly conversational tone. "You'll not even teach me disgust for those of your ilk; I learned that long ago."

"Zaranda!" Simonne cried. The blond youth had snatched his cudgel, its

head shod in gray iron. He lunged at Zaranda with weapon upraised.

With a slithering whisper like a metal snake on stone, Crackletongue slid from its sheath. Zaranda extended her arm so that the saber's point found the notch of the youth's collarbone. He braked abruptly to avoid spitting himself, then dropped his cudgel, fell to his knees, and began to weep and plead for his life.

"You'll regret this," hissed his burly friend.

She pressed the dagger harder. "I suspect all I'll regret is not slaying you both. But that would distress my friend and spoil his fine rug, so I'll refrain. As long as you leave us in peace."

"You can't threaten us!" the boy exclaimed through gritted teeth. "Lord Ravenak—"

"—Is a cur unfit to sniff at honest dogs that go upon four legs. You may tell him so, with the compliments of the Countess Morninggold. Up, now, and quit sniveling. It's tiresome." The latter was spoken to the blond youth, whom she urged up with Crackletongue's tip beneath his chin.

"Zaranda," White Eyebrow said hollowly, "you know not what you do. When you're gone, they'll just return, with more of their kind."

"He's right!" shrilled the blond youth, getting his courage back now that Zaranda had promised not to kill him. His nose was quite red. "We'll fix you, you little monster! We'll—"

"What's your name, dung-blossom?" Zaranda inquired. The blond boy shut up and glared at her from red-rimmed eyes. She gouged the flesh beneath his chin. "*Your name!* You let slip that of Fredaro here, for which I'll let him thank you in his own way and time. Now I'll have yours."

"I'll say naught!"

"Oh, yes, you'll speak. But if I have to put a compulsion on you, I'll have you turning cartwheels naked down the street as well."

"You lie! You're a fighter, not a wizard!"

The lights in the shop blazed intolerably high, then all went out, plunging the room into darkness so abruptly it should have made a crashing sound. Then a single lantern flared out again from the wall above the youth's ragged hair, casting rainbow-edged light through crystal facets.

"Your name?"

"G-Gonsalvo, my lady!"

"Attend me well, Fredaro and Gonsalvo, as if your lives depended on it, which they do. Should any harm befall this shop or its proprietor or his daughter or any customer arriving or departing, I shall hunt you down and cut your hearts out. On my soul I swear it. Now, begone."

All the lights came back on. By the time the illumination had found its way back to all the crannies of the shop, the door was banging shut on its frame, and the bells were jingling.

"Zaranda, Zaranda," White Eyebrow said, shaking his head. "Do you think all problems can be solved at swordpoint?"

"Not at all, old friend. Most of the problems life heaps on us are susceptible to no such solution, in fact. Yet some will answer to nothing else. It's vital to learn to recognize them in such times as these."

"If you stoop to violence, are you really any better than they?" the gnome asked.

"Yes," Zaranda said. "If I do it to defend myself and those dear to me."

She sheathed her cutlery and looked to Simonne, who said nothing, though her eyes blazed like lanterns, dark though they were.

"But I cannot always be here to help, as you and they both saw," she said. "And that you must deal with as you see fit. I bid you good day."

* * * * *

That night Zaranda's sleep was tormented by dreams, and a whispering Voice.

She was not the only one to dream, nor to hear words spoken in those dreams. And unlike her, some heeded what was said.

Unseasonable overcast trailed tendrils down into Zazesspur like arms clad in dirty, wet wool sleeves. They brushed Zaranda's face with clammy familiarity as she hustled along narrow Hostler Alley to her early morning appointment. The air was given added presence by the smells of last night's grease, this morning's breakfast, and fresh horse dung.

The buildings' upper stories cantilevered over the already narrow alley so that they threatened to pinch off the dangling arms of cloud. This was a district given over to hostelries of the middle grade and lower and served the other needs of travelers: stables, provisioners, and taverns. There was also the inevitable water-fluid population of demimondaines, barkeepers, scullery maids, back-alley bones-rollers, charm-vendors, cutpurses, rogues, bards, alley-bashers, and joy-girls and -boys, few of whom could be found abroad at this hour. The visitor to Zazesspur must seek elsewhere for fixed places of entertainment.

There were theaters of various sorts in the Players' Quarter, and gambling palaces and brothels in their own discreetly fortified precincts. There, well-paid swordsmen and the odd mage kept at bay the riffraff, whether jack-rollers and strong-armers, social activists who followed the brothers Hedgeblossom and Earl Ravenak, or even the individual city councilors' uniformed goon squads. The very lowest ranks of such establishments were to be found in Bayside, the waterfront district, where the genuine riffraff held sway.

Tourists were at something of a premium these days. The harbor traffic, which was all that kept the city alive and reasonably prosperous, provided some custom for the inns, but nothing like what they had been accustomed to before the troubles began. Some hostelries had simply converted themselves into apartment blocks serving those displaced by the nomad invasions or the discord in the countryside, but it was still a buyers' market for short-term accommodations. Which was how Zaranda was able to keep herself and her comrades quartered in reasonable comfort despite the state of her finances, which were eroding like an arroyo bank in a heavy rain.

Preoccupation and a poor night's sleep dragged Zaranda's head forward and down from its customary proud carriage. As a result, she almost bumped into a man who came boiling out of a gate to her left. Or rather, *smoking*; he was trailing smoke and sparks from hair and clothing, and caterwauling like a man whose hair and clothes were on fire.

He pitched himself headfirst into a stone horse trough, raising a substantial hiss of steam and an even more substantial reek.

"What seems to be the problem?" Zaranda asked mildly as he reared up with algae hanging about his face and ears like green dreadlocks.

He pointed a dripping, still-steaming arm back through the gate into the stableyard. "Th-that *witch*," he said, sputtering spray. "She put fire to me."

Zaranda felt her brows knit in a frown. Her own experience told her "witch" usually referred to a female, and in no complimentary way. *Best move along right now*, the cautionary voice within her said. *You've an appointment to keep, and this affair is none of yours.*

She hitched her belt around to bring Crackletongue's hilt more closely to hand. "What witch?" she asked.

Faces were beginning to poke out of windows. Some were sleep-blurred

and reluctant, others open and awake, but all showed some degree of eagerness. This was a district of honest working folk who rose and set with the sun, as well as others who lived to different schedules, morally and chronologically, but Zazesspurians of all stripes relished little more than a good civic disturbance.

A small but brisk disturbance brewed in the stable-yard. Angry voices muttered. There came thumps and foot-scuffles and a squall like an angry badger. Then into the alley came a knot of rough-hand laborers and stable-boys, dragging with them what appeared to be an animated bundle of pale sticks and dirty burlap. The bundle was kicking and flailing and emitting the angry noise.

As they cleared the open gate, there was a sharp *crack!*, a fat blue spark, and a smell of ozone. At the same instant the whine resolved itself into "... let me *go!*" The bundle's captors instantly obeyed, with yelps of dismay.

"What," Zaranda asked mildly, "is going on?"

A gap-toothed stableboy wearing a badly stitched leather hood was waving his hands in the air as if to cool them. "The creature shocked us!"

The creature in question reached a thin, dirty hand to part tentacles of dirty red hair. An amber eye peered forth from a grimy, snub-nosed face. It took in Zaranda with a wild adolescent mix of defiance, hope, and fear.

"Why were you holding, um, her in the first place?" asked Zaranda, concluding mainly from intuition that the captive was female. She made her hand slide along her belt away from the saber's hilt. She felt she had lost points yesterday by drawing blade on Earl Ravenak's earnest young ravers. Surely she could handle a random handful of louts without recourse to arms. *Particularly since this is no business of yours.*

"She witched Zoltan!" another lout exclaimed. He was a pinch-faced lad with curly, dirty blond hair and soiled apron, who was waving a butter paddle with as much menace as such an implement could muster. Unlike most of the others, who wore the blue and green of the Hostlers & Stablehands Guild, he had a green and brown rag knotted about one skinny biceps, signifying his affiliation with the Taverners, Innkeepers, & Provisioners.

"She's always up to tricks," a third said. "She soured a pail of cream Luko was carrying to the buttery of Bustamante's Excellent Hostelry."

"I did *not*," the redheaded girl said heatedly. She was even dirtier than her tormentors, Zaranda noted. "At, least, I don't *think* I did."

"Did too!" blond Luko declared, brandishing his paddle for emphasis. "And now she set Zoltan all aflame."

"He didn't look all aflame to me when he hit the horse trough," Zaranda said. "More smoldering around the edges."

"She made me get all tingly all over my body!" Zoltan announced. The way the slime-tendrils hung down over his ears and between his wildly rolling eyes made him resemble some kind of exotic and unsavory sea creature that had crawled up the pilings in the harbor. "Then my hair caught fire! And my clothes, too. I was burning up!"

Zaranda stared at him.

He dropped his eyes. "Well," he said, "I was smoking pretty good. *Feh.*" He spat out muck.

"It's time we paid her back for her tricks!" cried somebody from the back of the small mob. The others growled assent—an ugly sound, though without

any perceptible move to put it into effect.

"What's your name, girl?" Zaranda asked.

"Scab."

"How attractive. Did you really do that to him?"

She nodded. "I woke up to find him pawing me as I slept in the s-s-*straw!*"

The dam of her defiance burst, and her face flooded with tears.

Beyond her sobbing, the silence in the alley grew even thicker than the fog.

* * * * *

"No, child," Zaranda Star said for what felt like the hundredth time. "I don't need an apprentice. Besides, it's not exactly healthy to be in my vicinity at the best of times, and these are far from that."

Scab stuck out her underlip in a truly impressive pout. Zaranda said nothing. The girl produced a tremor in the projecting lip, and when that elicited no more response, a shine of moisture appeared in an eye visible between clumps of dirty hair.

They sat on the steps of what had once been a fine residence of green granite blocks, between a pair of stone guardian beasts that had long since weathered to couch-shaped lumps. The building had been converted to a carpet warehouse; the arched doorway at her back was bricked over. Zaranda had her long trouser-clad legs drawn up before her and her arms around her knees, and, still ignoring her companion, gazed off across the Carpet Mart.

The sun was high in the sky. The broad plaza, flagged in yellow sandstone worn to a shiny and treacherous polish by generations of feet, was dotted with the rug merchants' kiosks, hung like flags with their colorful wares. Despite the troubles, buyers still flocked to Zazesspur from the north of Faerun to purchase excellent Tethyrian wool carpets, as they did to buy the finely finished furniture and cabinetry for which Zaz itself was famous. Myratma was better known for other textiles; but Zazesspur was the place for rugs.

Of course, the buyers would go back home with lurid tales of having purchased their wares from camelback, from hawk-faced bearded men with flowing robes and headcloths, and would sell them as "Calimshite" rugs. In fact Calimshite silk rugs, though pretty, were inferior in craftsmanship and durability to Tethyrian wool carpets; the real gems of the great bazaar in Calimport were silken rugs from far Zakhara—wondrous indeed, if of the nonflying variety, since the Zakharans exported few of their magic carpets willingly. Still, to most of the folk of the Heartlands and farther north, all fine rugs from the South were Calimshite, and that was that, just as Amn and Tethyr were called Empires of the Sands, in spite of not having any sand to speak of. People are like that, and not just on Toril.

Still avoiding Scab's piteous gaze, Zaranda sighed and stretched. It had been an eventful morning.

When Zaranda and her self-proclaimed charge arrived, a brief but vigorous skirmish had been in progress between some of Earl Ravenak's bullyboys and a patrol of civic guard blue-and-bronzes armed with iron-shod cudgels, evidently bribed by the carpet merchants to take an interest in Hairhead doings, which they were notorious for overlooking. The square had subsequently hosted two outbreaks, a jostling, and a battle royal among the colorfully caparisoned retainers of the various city council members. The last of these, from which the rug merchants were just finished righting kiosks and dusting off rugs knocked sprawling by the festivities, had pitted the minions of

Anakul the Just against the goons of Jinjivar the Sorcerer.

Anakul was something of an oddity: a professed devotee of evil who, though he wore the silver wrist-chains of Cyric, used as his personal symbol the black hand on red field of dead Bane. Even for Zazesspur in the years after the monarchy's overthrow, it might seem a little much to have a man who was openly nostalgic for Bane on the ruling council, but so obsessive was Anakul in his zeal for order and the rule of law that he was widely known as one of the most honest men in the city. It was said that he only cheated you if he had the full force of law on his side, justifying his only half-sardonic nickname. Of course, not even his passion for order prevented him from employing a robust corps of head-knockers. That was sheer survival.

Jinjivar the Sorcerer didn't hire head-knockers, as far as anyone knew, though he paid clagues to spread rumors in the streets about his magic prowess. The son of a Calim Desert chieftain and—again, he claimed—the pasha's daughter by a concubine, Jinjivar had grown to adulthood among the nomads. He still maintained many contacts in his homeland, and though Tethyrians tended to disdain handiwork other than their own, had grown rich selling them magical and fanciful doodads for which their neighbors to the south were known, such as sand-clocks that turned themselves and brooms that swept of their own accord. Since his men wore blue and purple while Anakul's livery was the black and red of Bane, the latter conflict had been particularly trying for Zaranda's eyes.

The one thing Zaranda hadn't seen was any sign of the one-armed man. *You've done it this time*, her internal voice chided. *You stuck your nose where it didn't belong and went saving the world again, and now you've lost your chance to regain your goods.*

Scab emitted a sigh so gusty that she must have almost burst herself drawing in the air for it. "That's it, then," she announced in doom-filled tones. "If you won't take me as your apprentice, I shall stop eating and starve myself to death. Quicker in the long run."

Despite growing disappointment and desperation, Zaranda had to press her lips hard together to keep from smiling. "Come, now. Surely it's not so bad as that."

"Yes, it is. I'm an orphan. I have no home. I can't work or sleep at the stable anymore, and no one will apprentice me. Death is all that remains."

Zaranda frowned and rubbed her chin. To be sure, the girl was in a hard way. *It's no concern of yours*, the voice inside her said. Sometimes that voice seemed to represent good sense—sounding not unlike Goldie, in fact—and other times something darker. Just now she had to admit the truth of what it said. Yet there was something about this girl that drew her.

"Why can't you keep an apprenticeship?" she asked.

The girl drew her head down between the shoulders of her burlap smock, which seemed to have as much filth and grease in it as jute. It had taken all of Zaranda's skill at maneuvering to get the girl to sit downwind of her, and the occasional shift in the wind's direction still made her wince.

"Come now," Zaranda said in response to Scab's mumble. "You can't expect me to consider taking you on if you won't be candid with me."

"Things . . . *happen*," the girl said, as if the words were being drawn from her on a rope knotted bigger than her throat.

" 'Things'?"

"Like what happened at the stable. Strange things ... magic things, I guess."

"Like spells?"

The girl shook her head. She had lowered her face, and tears dripped from beneath the obscuring curtain of her hair. "No. I only know one or two spells, little things. That's all I've ever had time to learn."

"Then what?"

"I don't *know*. I get worried, or scared, or mad, and things just *happen*. Then I get sent away again. I can't control it. That's why I want to study magic. So I can figure out what's happening to me."

She raised her head and looked at Zaranda through lakes of tears. "It's just as well this way. You'd just get mad and send me away too!"

No, girl! the voice in Zaranda's head cried. *Not a challenge!*

She surveyed the square a final time. No sign of a one-armed man or anyone taking interest, undue or otherwise, in the tall swordswoman and her scruffy companion. She had missed the one-armed man—if indeed he ever existed.

From an alley debouching onto the north side of the square issued a party of shaggy youths in black and brown: Earl Ravenak's toughs. Merchants and buyers scattered as the youths marched determinedly upon a Hedgeblossom crowd, brandishing cudgels and steel-singing lengths of chain.

Zaranda stood. It was time to admit she had come on a fool's errand and get on with her business. Indeed, the vague outlines of a plan were taking shape in her mind. She would still take what steps she could to regain her lost fortune here in Zaz. But if that didn't work, she was already working on an alternative.

That was her way: oftentimes the physical, impetuous side of her nature got her into trouble, but she had a keen eye and a quick wit, and she had long learned to rely on those faculties to get her out of whatever tight places she found herself in. Her current situation looked hopeless—but that was when she did her best work.

The Hedgeblossom orator—who did not appear to be a halfling himself—had hopped down from his wagon-seat podium. Now he threw off the canvas covering the bed, revealing a pile of makeshift shields and weapons: nail-studded staves, iron bars, a few rude short swords. Snatching these up, his listeners fell eagerly upon the surprised Hairheads and commenced to whale on them.

"Have you a name?" Zaranda asked the girl crouching at her feet.

"What?"

"A name. Surely you weren't born Scab."

"Chenowyn," the girl said sullenly.

"That's a lovely name. Chenowyn."

"I don't feel lovely."

"Start using your proper name, rather than 'Scab,' and who knows? That may yet change."

"What's the good of being lovely if you're a mage?" the girl demanded. Abruptly she clouded up again. "Not that that matters anymore. Not that anything matters. . . ."

"Oh, stand up," Zaranda said. "It's time to go."

Chenowyn stared up at her in astonishment. "You mean you'll take me as

your apprentice?"

"No, I'm out of the magic business. But I won't leave you wandering to starve in a gutter—or get yourself lynched, more likely."

The girl stuck out her underlip.

Zaranda stretched forth her hand. "Now come, if you're going to. Or stay: your choice."

Hesitantly the girl took her hand and pulled herself upright. Zaranda grinned and ruffled her hair. "That's the girl, Chen. And who knows? I may be able to use those wild talents of yours."

* * * * *

"Don't look now," Goldie said as Zaranda came into the dusty day-warmed gloom of the stable. The mare had the place all to herself. "There's a nasty derelict kobold sneaking up behind you."

Chenowyn drew herself up to all her not-slight height. "I'm not a kobold," she said. "I'm a *girl*."

"You could have fooled me," the mare said. "In fact you did."

Chen's eyes bulged as it struck her that she'd just been addressed by a horse. "It talks!"

"Goldie, meet Chenowyn," Zaranda said. "She'll be staying with us for a while. I just know you two are going to get along."

Goldie rolled an eye at the girl, then peeled her upper lip away from her front teeth and bobbed her head in the universal horse gesture for *you stink*.

"Goldie!" Zaranda said sharply. Then to Chen: "Don't take it to heart. She's not civilized this hour of the morning."

Chen was staring at Goldie, with the expression one would wear looking at a captive Hook Horror. "It's sunset," she said.

"That's Goldie for you."

Goldie produced a gusty horse sigh. "I can see you've been terribly busy out hunting up strays to adopt. I suppose it's no great surprise you haven't been by earlier to find out that a patrol had come round to arrest your pet orc."

"Shield of Innocence has been arrested?"

"Nooo," said Goldie. "I didn't say that. I said, a patrol had come *by* to arrest him."

"How come it talks?" Chen demanded. "Horses don't talk."

"I do," Goldie said with great dignity.

"What happened?"

"Now, now, Randi, you're sounding almost petulant. Whereas you really should be very grateful to me. If it weren't for me, complete and total disaster would have been the order of the day—no thanks to certain parties I could name. ..."

"*Goldie!*"

The mare's flanks swelled and a vast sigh rushed from her flared nostrils. "Not appreciated, never appreciated, but isn't that a horse's lot in life? Bear another's burden all day, with never a 'Goldie, do you feel like walking about in the hot sun all day whilst I loll about your back?'—there, there, Zaranda, don't get that dangerous gleam in your eye. Your orc is fine. So is the ranger, and so am I, if you happen to care."

Zaranda took a deep breath and tried to remember the spell for casting lightning bolts. She'd never been able to quite get her mind around that one. Trying to was always good when she needed distracting.

"Goldie," she made herself say calmly, "will you please tell me what *happened?*"

"I would've long since, had it not been for your constant magpie interruptions. Along about the sixth bell after dawn a party of blue-and-bronzes came by, looking like so many cheap Calimshite knock-offs of Lantanna mechanical soldiers. They claimed to have information you were harboring an 'unnatural monster,' as their leader put it. Fortunately, one of the grooms saw them coming up the street and ran in to tell everybody. Divining their purpose in that incisive way I have, I quickly sent Shield off to the roof to impersonate a gargoyle. Stillhawk went along, since you'd told him not to take his eyes off the orog. The guardsmen came in, blundered around for a while, and left."

"Where's Shield now?"

"Oh, he's still being a gargoyle. I took a turn in the yard about noon and had a look at him. He does a really creditable gargoyle, by the way; wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if Torm had finally revealed his true calling to him."

Zaranda darted into the stableyard and looked up. No, she thought, Goldie's mistaken. There's only one exceptionally large and ugly gargoyle up there . . . exceptionally large, ugly, *wingless* gargoyle. . . .

She started back inside. Then she stopped. Zazesspur was a city in which gargoyles on the roofs of hostelries wouldn't strike anybody as odd, but she didn't remember seeing *any* on the *Repose's* roof before.

She looked up again. Crouched on the roof's very verge, clawed hands on knees, cowl thrown back and mouth held wide to reveal what even from four stories down was very impressive dentition, was unmistakably Shield of Innocence.

"Gods!" Zaranda breathed, and raced inside.

"He's been up there all day?"

Goldie nodded.

"Where's Stillhawk?"

"So far as I know, he's up there too. But then, of course, no one tells me anything; I'm only a beast of burden."

"How did you know," Chenowyn asked with disarming innocence, "that when the guardsmen said they were looking for 'an unnatural monster,' they didn't mean you?"

Goldie opened her mouth. Then she shut it, and her eyes popped wide open.

"Congratulations," Zaranda told the girl. "You must have magic: that's the first time I've seen her rendered speechless." Then she was racing for the stairs.

* * * * *

Stoic as a statue, Shield of Innocence sat cross-legged with claws on thighs as Zaranda applied a fragrant white balm compounded of certain soothing herbs to the blisters that made up most of his face. "I can't believe you just sat there in the sun all day," she said. "Paladin of Torm or not, you're still an orc. You're *allergic* to the sun."

Sitting with his back against a dormer and his booted feet braced on the red hemicylindrical roofing tiles, Stillhawk furrowed his brow, his equivalent of an angry outburst. Like Farlorn, he still doubted the orog, and it in particular troubled him to hear an evil being referred to as *paladin*. Though the paladin's path was in many ways as inaccessible to a man of the ranger's character as it was to an orc of unrepentant stripe, he served the same ideals.

Shield's massive shoulders shrugged. "How can one serve Light if one fears the Burning Face?" he asked, using a common orcish name for the sun.

"Easily," Zaranda said. "Don't you think good deeds need doing at night? Besides, you can wear a cowl."

"Have you ever seen a cowled gargoyle?"

Zaranda stopped with a gob of ointment on her fingertips. "Was that humor? That was humor, right?"

"I did what must be done. If I suffer, it is no more than my sins have earned." He frowned. "Though it gripes my soul to have fled from minions of the law. Did I do wrong? May Great Torm judge me harshly."

"May Great Torm not be such an ass!" Zaranda burst out. "Those men intended you harm, and it had nothing to do with anything you've done, or even who you are. It was what they *thought* you were, and your innocence would have meant nothing to them. Is that what the law is all about?"

"Still, laws are laws," the great orc said with childlike conviction. "We must obey."

"It is against no law in Tethyr to be an orc," Zaranda said. Of course, that was because for Tethyrians, such a law would be like outlawing venomous serpents or spiders. This didn't seem the time to mention that fact. "And besides, those weren't minions of the law; they were the servants of the city council. The city police serve the law of Zazesspur. The guard is something else again."

"Oh," Shield said.

Zaranda drew in a deep breath, released it in a soundless sigh. She glanced aside at Stillhawk. The ranger was rubbing the dark bristle that covered his chin if he went more than four hours without shaving. He shook

his head. Well, sophistication wasn't his strength either.

"There," she said, putting the finishing touches on the olog. The white ointment made Shield's face, a great pitted, tusked, and snouted moon, a truly terrifying sight, like a mask Dalelands children might put on to frighten homeowners into giving them treats at Highharvestide. "That's done. And now—"

She turned to look at Stillhawk. "Now the two of you must leave. Right this minute. Get outside the walls and make yourselves scarce in the countryside. The scullions have packed food for you, and in the unlikely event that it runs out before I come to join you, there's no better huntsman in Tethyr than Vander Stillhawk of the Elven Woods."

Both her companions spoke at once, which was at least quieter than most such multiple outbursts. "I serve you," Shield of Innocence said. "I will not leave." For once in accord with the great orc, Stillhawk signed to the same effect.

"You cannot serve me here, Shield. What can you do for me if you're rotting in the dungeons that surely lie beneath that vast ugly slab of a palace Baron Hardisty has built? All you can do here is increase the risks for me. So indulge my cowardice and go."

She reached out to touch a scarred and pitted cheek. Her flesh still quailed from the contact, but only a little. "For me, Shield. Please."

Pouting—which his tusks made a truly alarming sight—he nodded his huge head. Zaranda stood and faced the ranger.

Why—? he started to sign.

"Because someone has to keep Shield of Innocence out of trouble," she said. "The countryside's less risky for him, but only just. Something's going to break soon, old friend, and whichever way it falls, I'll have need of all the help I can get. His as well as yours."

Stillhawk raised his head and managed somehow to look even more grimly stoic than usual—his form of outraged protest and reproach. I cannot tell you the real reason, old friend, Zaranda thought. In my selfishness I brought you here among these gray stone walls you hate. And here you can do nothing but pace like a wilderness beast condemned to a cage, feeling the pressure of those walls like acid on the skin. The least I can do is redeem my misdeed. But of course she could not say she did this for his benefit, or he would refuse to go.

"Please, I ask that you do this for me. If you would help me, this is the best way."

Stillhawk's brown eyes gazed deep into Zaranda's smoke-gray ones. Then he nodded and turned to pick up his bow, which leaned against a chimney with a beaten-tin cover shaped like a wizard's peaked hat. Shield resumed his cowed robe and strapped on the harness that held his scimitars crossed over his back. After a moment's debate by eye, he slithered over the edge of the roof and swung in through the hallway window Zaranda had left open and under Chen's guard. Stillhawk followed.

Zaranda stood, stretched, gazed up at the stars, treasuring an evanescent moment alone with them. The sullen light-froth from tens of thousands of candles and lanterns, the smokes of the city, and high tattered clouds skidding across the sky from the Trackless Sea hid most of them from her sight. She wished she were alone in her tower at Morninggold, with nothing to

impair her intimacy with the stars, neither in the sky nor in her future.

I'll be doing well to keep my freedom out of all this, she thought, much less Morninggold and my astronomy tower.

But she wasn't yet dead, which meant, on principle, that she refused to give up. She turned and made her cautious way down.

* * * * *

"Zaranda!" A familiar call—as clear and beautiful as the cry of a soaring eagle—made her turn from the entrance to her chamber on the Winsome Repose's third floor.

"Farlorn," she said, shifting without thought to interpose herself between the half-elf and Chenowyn. "Where have you been?"

He caught her in an embrace that lifted her off the floor—though he'd inherited the delicate appearance of his mother's people, he also had the strength of his father's. "Zaranda! I'm terribly sorry. I came as soon as I heard."

"About what?" Zaranda said. It took her a moment to make the decision to disengage herself from his arms after he had set her down again. Damn him! she thought. Or, perhaps, damn me.

"About the orc and Stillhawk! How the guard arrested them."

"Stillhawk?"

He shrugged. "I know the ranger well. He cared as little for the beast as I, but he'd die before he'd fail your trust. They cannot have taken the orc without having him as well."

"They took neither," Zaranda said. "Both hid. I've sent them outside the city."

The half-elf's huge hazel eyes blinked. "But that's wonderful news," he said, "at least so far as Vander Stillhawk's concerned, though I cannot say the same for the evil creature you insisted on adopting."

As Zaranda wound up to unload on him, he lifted his head so that his pointed ears made him resemble a wary forest creature, sniffed the air in the hallway, lit amber by an a single ancient fly-specked lantern hung on the wall. "Whatever is that smell?" he asked before Zaranda could speak. "It's truly prodigious. You must ask for new quarters, Zaranda; a rat—a giant one, by the whiff—has crept among the rafters and expired."

The hair at the back of Zaranda's neck rose. *Something* was gathering behind her. It reminded her of the first time she had ever *felt* dweomer, mustering her first halting spell under the gentle but exacting eye of Alshayn, her mentor. This was similar, yet not the same. It was power, and it was menace.

"Farlorn," she said, taking her new charge by the arm and feeling the hairs on her own arm rise in response, "I'd like you to meet Chenowyn. She'll be staying with us for a while. Chen, this is Farlorn Half-Elven, called the Handsome."

Farlorn shied back, a look of distaste on his face. "Indeed? This ragamuffin's the source of the smell, I warrant. Have you decided to open your own museum of grotesques, Zaranda?"

"Don't take what he says to heart, Chen," Zaranda said. "He's a bard, and bards love the sound of their own voices too well. He doesn't mean anything by it."

"I don't like him," the girl said.

"Where have you been the past few days?" Zaranda asked, interposing herself between the two.

"I was visiting among my mother's people. Do you know, that darkling I slew the other night matched the description of a Moon Elf maid from Tethir Forest who vanished six weeks ago? Her people were much grieved to learn of her fate."

"Did they say where she'd vanished, or what she was doing at the time?"

"All they knew was that she went abroad on the streets at night upon some errand, and was seen no more."

"So the darklings enslave their victims somehow?"

"That was no slave I fought. Her thirst for my blood was genuine. Would a slave fight with such will?"

"Enchanted, then. Perhaps." She shrugged. "Well, we've troubles enough of our own. Good night to you, Farlorn, and I'm glad to see you well."

"Need you rush away?" He took her shoulders in his hands and began to knead her neck muscles with fine, strong fingers. "I was thinking we might share a bottle of wine together. Perhaps I could sing you a song to soothe your cares."

She disengaged herself deftly from his grasp. "Just now I need a balm more powerful even than your words, and that's sleep. Good *night*." She undid the lock, guided Chen inside, and shut the heavy wooden door on his frustration.

She turned then, slumped against the wall, allowed herself to slide down until her rump touched the rush-strewn floor. "Damn him."

Chen stood to one side, looking as out of place as a dragon in the tidy if threadbare chamber, with its modest furnishings, its whitewashed walls and dark-stained wood trim. "Why do you curse him?"

Zaranda shook her head. "To keep from cursing myself." She picked herself up. "Now what we need to do is summon the help and have them bring round a straw pallet and some bedding for you. Also a tub and plenty of hot water."

"Why?"

"Because you're long overdue for a bath, my fine young friend."

Chen straightened and in defiance shook back her clotted strands of hair. When she did that, she looked as if she might conceivably be pretty beneath that coat of grime. "Why should a mage be concerned with such matters?"

"A mage may do whatever she wishes," Zaranda said. "And so can you. But, if you wish to stay with me—much less become my apprentice—you'll have to be less a burden on my nose. Farlorn was right about the state of your hygiene."

Chen scowled thunderously. Angry lights danced at the backs of her amber eyes, and sparks seemed to gather at the roots of her hair. Zaranda felt that ominous force gathering itself again.

She crossed her arms. "Go ahead, strike me to a cinder," she said. "I won't stop you. But you'll never master magic if you can't first master yourself."

Chen glared at her with wild fury in her eyes, and for a moment Zaranda thought she had overplayed her hand. What alarmed her most was that she wasn't alarmed.

Then Chen exhaled explosively, and it seemed her anger passed forth as well as her breath, leaving her small, wilted, and vulnerable. "I'm sorry," she

said, then began to cry.

"Poor dear," Zaranda said. She opened the door to call for a servant.

* * * * *

Naked but for a skin of sweat, the top sheet discarded on the floor and the bottom rumbled into a damp relief map of the mountainous Starspire Peninsula, which guarded the harbor at Zazesspur from storms—Zaranda Star writhed in the grip of nightmare.

A score and more of hands reached out, it seemed, from the bed itself to seize her, pin her down despite her struggles, and caress her with obscene and unwelcome fervor. From somewhere immeasurably far below, that insidious Whisper came: *Surrender, Zaranda. Give in. Your struggles are futile, your quest doomed. Give in, and you will reap greater rewards than that paltry scrap of nothing that you seek—greater than you can imagine.*

Zaranda moaned low in her throat. What she found most hateful was that she was responding—not to the hissing insinuations of the Voice, but, in her loneliness and hunger, to the touch of phantom hands.

Hungry. Tired. Alone. Give in to Me, Zaranda Star, and you shall know satiation of every appetite, surcease sweet beyond imagining, and the comfort of Unity with something greater than yourself. Yield to Me, Zaranda; pure pleasure awaits. ...

A scratching came at the bars that covered the opened windows; no innkeeper in Zazesspur was ingenuous enough to believe the mere fact that a room lay on an upper story offered any insuperable barrier to the city's enterprising thieves. Zaranda snapped awake with the jarring suddenness of a catapult arm slamming into the stop. She had a woozy, disoriented moment, and a lingering hallucination of arms and hands, gray-fleshed and black-nailed, withdrawing into the wadded sheet.

She looked toward the window to see a hunched and winged black shadow crouching on the sill.

The great house looked as if it had been assembled out of bits and pieces of many architectural epochs, not all of them of this world. Zaranda paused in the midst of darkened Love Street to admire its many dubious splendors, though she had seen them before. Its facade was a riot of pilasters, friezes, a colonnaded portico with a single sapphire-blue lantern on top, windows wide, windows narrow, windows little more than slits, set without apparent regard for story, some lit, some not. The roof was a composite of planes and angles, chimneys and dormers of sundry styles and shapes; among forests of finials, gargoyles disported with caryatids, or perhaps menaced them.

Perhaps the oddest feature was that, taken whole, the effect was not of chaos—or rather, not pure chaos, but chaos with order imposed upon it, chaos channeled and restrained but not overmastered, leading to an effect both of harmony and tension. It seemed a natural thing, grown not built.

From all around her came rustlings and small murmurs from the shadows, skirting the edge of intelligibility without ever misstepping and falling into it. Zaranda felt no alarm. Wizard's houses were that way, this one more than most.

Let's get it done, she told herself. She squared her shoulders and marched up beneath the portico to double doors with stained-glass panels in their upper halves: on the left, the occupant's rune, on the right a stylized balance scale. The glass doors announced that this was the residence of a powerful mage no less than the rune; no one else would dare offer thieves so alluring a target.

A tug on the golden chain of the bellpull produced not chimes, but a thin eldritch cry, which seemed to echo in distant corridors of time and space rather than the hallways of a house. Then it produced a wait, stretching itself into what seemed to Zaranda's growing impatience like infinity before the doors were opened by a human footman, yawning and scratching himself through an indigo velvet waistcoat starred with a galaxy of diamond studs.

"Something?" he drawled, all indolence and insolence.

Zaranda set her lips and handed him the object that the winged black faceless being hunkered on her windowsill had pressed into her palm not an hour before—a glazed tile, palm-sized, displaying the selfsame sigil as the left door: a dragon's eye in black, with what seemed a genuine star sapphire inset as the pupil.

"Huh," he said, and ushered her in with a perfunctory bow. "Down the hall to the end, then past the stairs to the chamber with the open door. Can't miss it." He reseated himself on a stool with a red velour cushion, and subsided instantly to snores.

Entertaining but briefly the notion of kicking the stool from beneath him, Zaranda followed his directions. The hallway was brightly lit, with white walls and gilt trim. Doors opened left and right, giving glimpses of emphatically decorated parlors in which strange and richly clad hunched beings, of a generally humanoid cast, stood with heads together in apparent conversation. Only a few favored Zaranda with so much as a glance as she passed. Nonetheless, she had the sense of eyes following her—given the existence of such creatures as beholders, not a comfortable feeling.

The hallway debouched into an open space or shaft. A quick eye flick

showed galleries mounting upward until they blurred into shadow at a seemingly higher level than the house's highest point visible from without. Stairs from the floor immediately above, balustraded with obsidian, descended to the left and right. Zaranda turned left, availing herself of the chance to peek back the way she had come. As expected, she saw nothing but the dozing doorman.

Proceeding, she came into a chamber. The walls were panels of quartz, milky white, and running through them sparkling veins that might have been gold. A soft, diffuse light shone from them. There was no furniture as such, only stands and cases and pedestals, likewise all of polished stone: jadeite, nephrite, agate, feldspar and onyx, glabrous gray chalcedony. Like the walls, some of them glowed gently. They held gems and semiprecious stones in fabulous array, some polished, some rough, turquoises, amethysts, topazes, rubies, diamonds, emeralds, and everywhere sapphires. There were sapphires of yellow and gray and orange, sour-pallid green and faint pink; sapphires of every hue of blue, from the pale, heartless blue of the sky in the Savage North at high noon on Midwinter Day, to stones of indigo so rich as to appear black.

The only item in the room not stone was its occupant. A woman stood with her back to Zaranda Star. She was a few fingers shorter than Zaranda and slender as a kobold's hope of redemption. Raven hair hung straight down the back of a gown of velvet the same shade as the midnight-blue star sapphire globe, as large as an orange, which she held contemplatively in one slim-fingered hand.

"You did not come to see me," the woman said, replacing the sapphire sphere in its holder, carved from onyx in the shape of a claw, which stood atop a pedestal of self-luminous quartz. "That's why I had to summon you thus, in the midst of night."

She turned. Her face was as pale as marble and shaped like an idealized heart; her hair grew down in a widow's peak. Her eyes matched her gown and the globe in her hand. Her nose was thin, and so were her lips, features so perfect that the first impression was that she was plain. In fact she was beautiful, but her beauty was not the sort to inspire passion, nor the kind to haunt dreams, such as was often found in elvish folk. Rather it was the kind of beauty to inspire awe.

As to her age, Zaranda would have said she looked mature, but could have hazarded no further guess. Certainly the flawless features showed no wrinkles nor sign of drying on the high slanted cheekbones. She seemed ageless and precise as a drawn blade.

"I didn't have that which you bade me bring you," Zaranda said with a shrug. She did not bother mentioning that the sorceress might as easily have summoned her in the daytime. Nyadnar had small patience with complaint, and heard no irony but her own. "There seemed small point in paying a social call."

"You were wise to forbear to waste my time. What do you plan now?"

Zaranda set her lips against her reflexive reply, which was to ask what business the sorceress had with hers. Unlike her wealth and age, Nyadnar's patience wasn't legendary. Rumor in Zazesspur, where she had allegedly dwelt, off and on, for centuries, held that she was as powerful as Elminster. Zaranda doubted that, but she was sorceress enough herself to sense that

Nyadnar's power was great indeed; in the crawling of her skin she could sense enormous dweomer seeming to hover about the sorceress, as when Chen's emotions threatened to run away with her. Zaranda feared her, and for that reason had to guard against her own first reflex, which was defiance. The mage was not such to be either truly a friend or truly a foe of anyone, but her goodwill was much more to be coveted than her displeasure.

"At the moment I have few plans, but many possibilities," Zaranda said.

"You are too scattershot in your approach to life, child. Too given to disorder. You never truly had the discipline to be a mage."

"I lacked the patience, perhaps," Zaranda said tartly. "But I managed to advance so long as I stayed with it. And then I became a warrior, and had a certain amount of success at that. That's two careers I've made for myself—not bad for someone so disorderly."

"And now you've gone and wandered into a third profession," Nyadnar said imperturbably. "One in which you've not been thriving of late."

"I got your cursed head for you!" Zaranda flared, feeling cheeks grow hot. "I winkled it away from the Red Wizards of Thay and brought it safely all the way here—listening to its sophomoric suggestions and innuendo every step of the way, I might add." She made herself inhale deeply and struggled to be calm.

"Where is it now?"

"It seems that Baron Hardisty and his advisor Armenides have taken a personal interest in it. It is in their possession now, in the Palace of Governance." Zaranda tried not to slump. "I suppose you'll talk to them of buying it?"

"No such thing. You display again your propensity for irrationality. I do not wish my interest in the artifact advertised. Why else do you think I waited to summon you until such a time as it would seem nothing more than my well-known attention to all that goes on within the city walls?"

That was the way of Nyadnar: her eyes and spies were everywhere, but her actions, if any, she kept well hidden. As far as anyone could tell she hoarded facts for their own sake, as she did gems.

She asked for Zaranda's own account of what had happened to her recently. Zaranda gave it succinctly. Then she hesitated, and biting at a ragged scrap of cuticle on her thumb, said, "If the council won't give it back—"

"They won't."

"—then I could take it back. I stole it from the Red Wizards; I can steal it again."

"That would not be acceptable. First, I do not deal in stolen goods; despite your flippant reference, you considered your removal of it from the Wizards as a legitimate act of war against long-standing foes, and so do I. Second, while the baron and Armenides may not be as potent as the Zulkir Baastat, neither are they as complacent. You lack the ability to recover it by stealth or force. If you failed and were compelled to talk, it would inconvenience me."

She turned away, and her attention seemed to travel off among her treasures. Zaranda stood for a while, feeling a certain sardonic amusement at the blithe way Nyadnar talked about the possibility of her being put to torture. Eventually she turned to go. Nyadnar had no more use for the formalities of greeting and leave-taking than a cat.

"A moment." The sorceress's dry, husky voice stopped Zaranda at the door. "You recently acquired a new follower. The foundling girl from the

stable. Why did you take her in?"

"Perhaps because I was a starveling orphan myself, once upon a time."

"And what will you do with her?"

A shrug. "I've cleaned her up, which was a necessary first step. If she'll let me, I'll civilize her. And then—who knows?"

"Will you teach her magic?" She was gazing at Zaranda again, eyes huge and bottomless as midnight seas.

"Perhaps. If she learns some kind of self-control. The powers she has already could do real hurt to her or others. Maybe if she studies a bit of formal magic she'll calm down. Why the interest?"

"These wild talents of hers, this innate ability to gather and—however ineptly—manipulate raw dweomer . . ." Nyadnar picked up the sapphire sphere and held it forth. "Our world is a system in dynamic equilibrium, in which opposing forces strive against each other without one or another gaining the upper hand. Someone with such attributes as you describe might have the potential to throw the system badly out of balance, to destroy, perhaps, that equilibrium. Should that occur, the results would be—"

She let the globe fall. Zaranda gasped and took a step forward. Just before it hit the floor, the great gem seemed to dissolve into a cloud of dark mist.

"—unimaginable." The mist swirled briefly around the sorceress's feet, hidden by the hem of her gown, and then began to twine upward about the glowing quartz pedestal to the top, where it coalesced slowly back into a flawless sapphire sphere.

"You have any advice you'd like to share with me about how to deal with her?" Zaranda asked, a little unsteadily. "I mean, so I don't inadvertently help her blow up the universe or anything?"

"You must find your own way," Nyadnar said serenely, stroking the now-intact gem like a favored pet.

"I appreciate the implicit vote of confidence," Zaranda said. "But there's something you should know."

"Which is?"

"Before all this is over I may do a little unbalancing of my own. And while I think the universe is pretty safe from my efforts, I may just destroy an equilibrium or two."

"Perhaps," the sorceress said.

* * * * *

"You have been told your case would be handled via the proper procedures, Countess Morninggold," Duke Hembreon, the most powerful member of the city council, told Zaranda as they stood in morning sunlight in his garden. He spoke the title as he might the words *spoiled meat* or *gangrenous limb*, as it were describing a state he found distasteful but was powerless to affect. "I hardly see what you expect of me."

In his day the duke had been a puissant warrior. But age had caught him up. His once-powerful frame was shrunken and stooped, his hair and immaculately trimmed beard were white as a gull's wing, and his blue eyes were red-rimmed and prone to prolonged bouts of blinking. Nonetheless, his gaze was clear, and his voice firm. He wore a simple cerulean gown and a soft bladder hat of the same color.

"Perhaps a measure of mercy, Your Grace," Zaranda said. "I stand to lose everything, and have committed no crime."

"Ah, but that remains to be seen, pending the appropriate hearings and investigations." He held up a long, liver-spotted finger. "Mercy is admirable, but must not be allowed to hamper justice."

The duke's palace was of modest size, showing four blank whitewashed walls to the world, though a pitched roof of gray slates saved it from being as slablike as the much larger Palace of Governance that loomed not far to the west. The garden occupied a courtyard in the very center. It was quite cozy with greenery, the smells of leaves and early spring flowers and the water bubbling from a small fountain in the middle. Such a plan got one looked down upon by the neighbors, regardless of one's rank or pretension, for not sharing one's garden with others, though doubtless it had come in handy during the troubles.

A retainer in the duke's blue-and-white livery approached, discreetly clearing his throat for attention. "If His Grace will pardon the intrusion—"

"Yes? Very well, Strakes, what is it?"

Two more footmen with breeches clasped at the knees by silver broaches ushered a blonde girl in by the arms. Her face had a sulky snub-nosed beauty, contorted at the moment by angry hauteur. She wore a simple white robe. A torque of gold encompassed her slender neck.

"I regret to report that we discovered your daughter rifling Your Grace's purse," Strakes said, holding up a black velvet pouch. He had thinning black hair combed over the dome of his head, long, lugubrious features, a button nose, and a gift of speaking without moving his lips.

"Let me go!" the girl exclaimed, wrenching her elbows free of the footmen's grasp. She shook back her hair and held her chin high.

"Tatrina, Tatrina," the old duke said in a tone of half-hearted severity, "what am I to do with you?"

"You have more than you need!" she declared. "The poor children of Zazesspur need help. I was merely trying to do the right thing, since you will not!" She had the habit of speaking with almost visible exclamation marks.

"I devote the waking hours of every day to the welfare of the people of Zazesspur," Hembreon said, "especially the children."

"There must be more! Ao must reign triumphant!"

"I will not countenance your stealing from me for whatever purposes, however noble." He held out his hand. Strakes deposited the purse in it. The duke dug inside and produced a gold Zazesspur gulder. "Here, my child. Be at peace, and leave me in peace. I am a busy man."

The girl scowled. "This is not—"

"Enough!" the old man snapped. "You've taxed my purse; do not tax my patience. And if I catch you filching from me again, you'll be restricted to your chambers for a month!"

She sniffed, did another hair-flip, pivoted, and stalked from the garden. The servitors followed. Duke Hembreon sighed.

"Or at least a week." He shook his head. "Isn't that ever the way of it? No matter how much power one wields in the world, it's always hardest to rule one's home."

"I wouldn't know, Your Grace," Zaranda said. "I have no children."

"Perhaps you should bear some, Countess Morninggold. It would greatly enhance your sense of responsibility. Now, if you have no further matters to discuss, I crave your leave. The city's business presses."

* * * * *

There was a blue-and-bronze patrol standing in the street when Zaranda stepped out of the duke's gabled front door. At her appearance the leader swept off a purple velvet bladder hat with a long pheasant tail feather stuck in it and performed a sardonic bow.

"The Countess Morninggold, I presume?" he said with a sneer. He was a man of middle height or a shade beneath, whose expensive doublet—purple velvet slashed to display gold satin lining—and orange pantaloons augmented rather than concealed a bandylegged, ungraceful figure. His face and voice were well suited to sneering, the former being dominated by a large nose with a wart prominent on the side of it, and a ginger-colored goatee surrounding full lips below. An unprepossessing apparition, withal, yet Zaranda marked a lightness on his feet and a fluidity to his bow that belied his unhandy form. His codpiece was wrought in the face of a leering fiend with pointed tongue protruding.

"Indeed you do presume, I think," Zaranda said. "And whom have I the ... honor ... of addressing?"

The man's head was perfectly bald on top, with tufts of wiry reddish hair jutting to the sides. He made haste to replace his cap. "I am Shaveli, captain of the civic guard, though better known to the admiring multitudes as Shaveli Sword-Master." And he caressed the diamond-inset gold pommel of the swept-hilted rapier hung from a leather baldric.

He was known as a few other things, Zaranda's street contacts had told her over the last few days, including the commander of a well-feared secret detail of the guard known as the Specials. A brutal man, who had been a professional duelist before the reformers had offered him rank in the civic guard, he was rumored to make use of the office to indulge certain dark tastes. Men in such positions, and women also, were always rumored to do so. Looking at the man for the first time, though, Zaranda was minded to give the rumors credence.

"Am I to be arrested, then?" she asked. Behind the Sword-Master, his guardsmen shuffled their feet and shifted grips on their halberds uneasily as they eyed her with a mixture of desire and fear. Zaranda had a reputation of her own.

"The choice is yours, *Countess*," Shaveli said, saying the title as he might say *whore*.

"Then I choose not to be arrested. Good day." She started to walk past.

Two guards sprang forward to cross their halberds before her. "Ah, but there's the rub, *Countess*," Shaveli said. "If you choose not to be arrested, you must choose to come with us."

"Ah," she said with an acid-dipped smile. "I see. Our noble city council has seen fit to reform the language as well as the laws, so that *choice* means doing what the government compels one to do."

"You have said it," the Sword-Master said with a flourish and a bow. "And now, if you will follow me—"

"I have heard much about you, Countess Morninggold," the tall man said. He placed the dome back on the rotunda of a miniature building in his model city. He turned from the table to face Zaranda. His face was long and heavily handsome, shaven clean and just beginning to show the marks of weathering, age, and care, particularly in the lines around the mouth and the intense brown eyes. His square-cut hair was dark brown, heavily salted with gray. The simple severity of a gold-trimmed green tabard of rich fabric worn over brown blouse and golden hose minimized the visible effects of prolonged inactivity on a once-athletic frame. "I am honored to make your acquaintance."

He took Zaranda's hand, bowed over it, and pressed it to his lips. From below and around them in the vast half-completed Palace of Governance came the woodpecker and cicada sounds of artisans at work. The air in the chamber was still, warm, and charged.

"Your lordship's gallantry is impeccable, but I fear it outstrips your memory," Zaranda said. "We've met before."

He straightened and showed her a grin that stripped years from his countenance. "Ah, but that was Zaranda Star, the dashing war captain, not Countess Morninggold."

"And I have long been denied the pleasure of meeting either one," a voice said. From an archway a white-robed man emerged into the octagonal hall on the Palace of Governance's uppermost story. Civic guards lurked in the shadows without. Zaranda had not been disarmed before Shaveli bowed her mockingly into the baron's chamber, but Hardisty took few chances.

The newcomer was a spry elderly man with marmoset tufts of white hair surrounding a gleaming dome of head, a beak of a nose, bright blue eyes nestled among laughter lines above apple cheeks. A plain white robe hung on a spare frame. Sandals gently slapped the green marble floor as he strode toward Zaranda with hand extended.

"Countess, my chief advisor and friend, Armenides the Compassionate," Baron Hardisty said.

Zaranda presented her hand and was relieved when the cleric settled for shaking it rather than emulating Hardisty. She noted that his neck was bare.

"The honor's mine," she said, "especially considering high priests of Ao are far rarer in this world than captains or countesses. And please, my name is Zaranda Star."

Armenides beamed and nodded. "Just so, just so, good Mistress Star. And, the All-Father willing, his high priests shall not long remain a rarity in Faerun."

"My lifetime has seen the flight of dragons and the death of gods," Zaranda said. "Perhaps it shall be as you say, Excellency."

"If you can forgo titles, so can I. Armenides will suffice, or simply Father."

"As you wish."

"For my part please call me Faneuil, as once you did," Hardisty said. He gestured at the model city. "Do you like it?"

Zaranda walked round the model, leaning and stooping to study it with genuine interest. Elaborate and clever constructs had always appealed to her. The buildings were carved of wood to exquisite detail, and so placed that the noonday sun shone down through the octagonal skylight overhead and made them seem a real city somehow reduced and captured on a magician's table.

"It's wonderfully wrought, Faneuil. Did you build it yourself?"

He laughed. "Ah, but that I had the hand skill—or the time. I should more readily win the trust I need from our good people; you know how Tethyrians admire craftsmanship. No, only the vision's mine, guided by the clear eyes of Father Armenides." He held forth a hand. "Behold the Zazesspur of the future!"

Zaranda looked up in amazement. "Zazesspur?"

Hardisty smiled fit to split his head in half. "Indeed."

"You'd raze the city and rebuild it from earth upward?" she asked, straightening.

"An audacious plan, but one I hope to see completed before I pass on."

"But where are the houses and shops? All I see are blockish things like, ahh—"

"Like the palace itself, though smaller. Except for the Temple of Ao and All Faiths there across from it."

Armenides spread hands above the miniature city as if bestowing a benediction. "All parts of daily life shall be drawn together, even as over time the worship of the sundry gods, which is none other than worship of Ao in his myriad aspects, shall be re-absorbed into the body of the All-Faith. In these times of uncertainty and peril, compassion demands that we draw our flock close together where we can most efficiently watch over it."

"I'm uncomfortable thinking of people as sheep," Zaranda said. "But surely you didn't bring me here to discuss rebuilding Zazesspur, Faneuil."

"In a manner of speaking," the baron said, "yes. Specifically, that part you might play in the remaking of Zazesspur—and all Tethyr."

"And what might that be? I'm not much for stone-masonry, nor religion, for that matter."

The baron goggled slightly, then recovered and emitted a hearty laugh. "Ah, a joke. You were ever the sly wit, Zaranda. No, the greatest part of the task that confronts us requires neither trowel nor chisel nor level. It will require the skills of the tongue, and when they fail, the sword. You are remarkably adept with both."

"We do not overlook your skill in matters magical," the cleric added.

"I thought you were trying to clamp down on the mystic arts," Zaranda said. "Swordsmanship too, for that matter."

"Those are actions the council is contemplating," Hardisty said smoothly. "I have no official standing with that body."

"You did get them to build this palace and let you live in it."

"They recognize the beauty and strength of our ideas," Armenides said, "and indeed, their inevitability."

He paused to engage her gaze fixedly with his own. She felt a moment's jarring dislocation, a passing loss of balance as if a chasm had opened suddenly at her feet. She rocked back, trying to keep surprise from showing in her face.

"—certainly see the benefits of such a program," the priest was saying. His eyes were only eyes now, not spiritual hammers. "Magic and the sword do much grievous harm. For the sake of all, is it not wisest to restrict their usage to those with the training, wisdom, and moral perspective to use them properly?"

"Meaning us," Zaranda managed to croak.

Baron Hardisty leaned forward on the balls of his feet. "Then you'll join us?"
"What exactly—beyond the satisfaction of a job well done—is in it for me?"
"You would have a voice in restructuring our anarchic society," Hardisty said, "as well, obviously, as a hand in running it. Confirmation of your title as Countess Morninggold, as well as a grant-in-aid to secure your possession of it."

"Isn't that a bit ambitious, seeing as you don't yet control even Zazesspur?"
The two men laughed. "Have you never heard the saying that one doesn't hit what one doesn't aim at?" the cleric asked.

"You would certainly not want for material reward," Hardisty said. "During the Tuigan War you displayed considerable waywardness of thought and spirit. Yet always you fought for what you thought was right. Your greatest reward, I warrant, would be the power to help people."

To keep my house, she thought, and win the power to do unlimited good: what more could I ask for? She could think of a thing or two, certainly, such as the companionship of men who bathed and didn't have biceps bigger than their brains; but she suspected such amenities would be included in the bargain. All he's offering me is everything I've striven for all my life.

And then, in what seemed a different mental voice: And all it will cost me is my soul.

"What do you ask of me?"

"Your loyalty," Hardisty said. "Your support. Swear yourself to my service, and you shall have all we've spoken of and more. How say you?"

Zaranda laughed and held up a hand. "I say things are moving rather rapidly for me. I have some friends who depend on me for their livelihoods, just now. What of them?"

"Certainly you can employ whatever retainers you choose," the baron said, "provided they pass a minor investigation."

"Investigation?"

"A trifle of magic," Armenides said heartily, "to ensure the purity of their minds and motives. It is a sad truth that many minions of evil move at large through our chaotic world, and we cannot always know them by surface appearance."

"Indeed," Zaranda said. She drew a deep breath and expelled it through pursed lips. "Gentlemen, your offers are most kind. But I need time to assimilate all you've told me, and what you have proposed."

Hardisty gave an airy wave of his big square hand. "I should doubt your wisdom did you not want time to contemplate—may I now call you Countess?"

"Take all the time you need," Armenides said. His forefingers each traced a semicircle in the air before his face, completing the circle at the bottom. "And may the blessings of Ao the Universal follow wherever you walk in this wide world."

* * * * *

The six half-hour bells of midafternoon were still reverberating through the streets of Zazesspur when a company of civic guardsmen entered from either end of the block of the Winsome Repose and took up blocking positions. A squad of ten men in morions and breastplates, under the command of a young lieutenant and his sergeant, marched up to the front door of the inn.

The innkeeper, a small weasel-sleek, dark-haired man whose name was Quarlo, met them on the steps. The lieutenant, whose hair hung in black

pomaded ringlets to the shoulders, wore a bronze breastplate gorgeously wrought in the likeness of impressive chest and belly muscles, which surely were not mirrored by anything beneath. From the hilt of his rapier hung a scented ball as big as his fist, to help shield his nostrils from assault from the nearby stables. He unrolled a parchment scroll and read aloud "—therefore require you to deliver unto arrest and sequestration the persons of one Zaranda Star, self-styled Countess Morninggold, as well as all companions and chattels. In the name of the city council of Zazesspur, herewith attached the seal of Shaveli, captain of the guard."

Scrubbing his hands compulsively in his apron and rolling his beady eyes, Quarlo listened to the peroration. Then he said, "But, Excellent One, I cannot!"

The youthful lieutenant gave him a terrible eye, which he had devoted much mirror time to perfecting. "And why not?" he asked, in rage that was meant to thunder but squeaked instead.

"They're gone."

The lieutenant opened his mouth to pronounce doom upon the contumacious innkeeper. Then his eyes stood out from his olive-skinned face. "Gone?"

Quarlo nodded. "She paid her reckoning not an hour ago, for herself and her whole menagerie, and went trooping off to the harbor. She spoke of taking ship for Halruaa, or Zakhara even. Said she felt the climate here wasn't warm enough."

"Too warm for her, more like," rasped a voice from the patrol at the lieutenant's back. The other guards laughed, until a hard look from their sergeant—whose face looked as if it could be used to hammer nails, and had been—quelled them.

The lieutenant turned green. "Search the building!" he commanded in a voice strangled to a bat's ranging cry.

The patrol did, with sufficient thoroughness that more than one guest afterward had words with Quarlo about valuable but readily concealable personal effects that had turned up missing. The only sign they turned up that Zaranda and company had ever been there was a series of complaints from the grooms that her war mare used loaded dice, which the lieutenant could not make heads or tails of.

"To the harbor!" the lieutenant commanded in a more robust voice than he'd been able to muster earlier. The sergeant bellowed orders, and the little patrol set out past the puzzled cordon at double-time toward the harbor.

In the rear marched the grizzled sergeant, looking grimmer than usual. He secretly believed the rest of the little unit—Lieutenant Flower Petal in particular—had missed their calling when they took up the blue and gold of the civic guard instead of the motley of the Jesters, Fools, & Harlequins Guild. If you asked him, this tale of taking ship for exotic lands was thinner than beer would be if that blue-nosed old grassquit Armenides had his way with Zazesspur. If Zaranda was at the harbor, he himself was the Simbul, Queen of Aglarond.

On the other hand, the patrol had been most particularly warned that Countess Morninggold and her accomplices were clever as dragons and about as tractable. And there was that which his wife had never understood, back when he served in the army of Ithmong before Ernest Gallowglass was deposed by do-gooders, which lay behind what she chose to regard as his

slovenly lack of ambition: that while sergeants never stood first in line when spoils were doled out, neither did they when it came time to apportion blame. In this present case, Shaveli had hinted that, should the fugitives not be apprehended, someone's head and neck might soon come to a parting of the ways.

So the sergeant thought it best to hold his tongue. Thus he marched down to the harbor, alleviating the ache in his feet and lower back with visions of the so-superior young lieutenant spending the rest of his career as a civic guard officer leading darkling-hunting patrols through the notably extensive and noisome sewers of Zazesspur.

And so, in the fullness of time, did it come to pass.

Part II
Career of Evil

It was dusk along the Trade Way north of Zazesspur. Like mauve fog, nighthawks coursed on scimitar wings through twilight and sought prey. Off in the west, clouds rose like fanciful mountains above the unseen Trackless Sea, all slate and indigo and molten copper where the last rays of the fallen sun struck them.

The lure of honestly gotten gain being almost as powerful as the other kind, several families of southern Tethir foresters, related by marriage, had banded together to purchase a number of wagons and attempt the trip through the Starspire Mountains and south to Zazesspur. The wagons were piled high with animal skins, a kind of bark used in tanning, and other vegetable stuffs for the manufacture of dyes. The great merchant caravans no longer plied the Trade Way from Amn and points north down to Calimport. And, so, if these enterprising foresters could reach Zazesspur, they could expect to reap a rich return from the city's leather-workers and dyers.

They had made it through the mountains and most of the way to the city. Unfortunately, ill-gotten gain still had its allure. Consequently, there had come a sudden drum of hoofbeats as evening came on, and suddenly the little caravan was surrounded by a score of robbers, who swung down from horseback to menace the foresters with drawn bows. The foresters were no mean fighters themselves under most circumstances. But as their destination grew nearer, they had relaxed their guard, a process expedited by the passing around of a couple of stone crocks of berry brandy by way of celebration, now seen to be premature.

The robbers, initially elated at the bloodless capture of a half-dozen wagons, grew surly when they threw back the canvas covering the loads and found bales of bark and sheaves of dried herbs. The leader of the bandits, a burly, black-bearded ruffian clad in rude black leather garments, which summer's heat would soon render quite unthinkable, had the makeshift caravan's master brought before him as he stood by the roadside.

"Where are the valuables?" he demanded as Wyancott—a towheaded, middle-aged chief among the foresters—was thrust to his knees before him.

"Valuables?" the caravan master repeated as if confused. "What's in the wagons is all we have. What wealth we possessed went to buy the wagons and the mules to draw them."

"You mean we went to all this trouble over nothing but a mess of twigs and branches?" the bandit chieftain roared. "Are we aarakocra, to make nests for our dwellings? Produce some real wealth, and quickly, or prepare to suffer accordingly!"

But Wyancott could only shake his head numbly. The leader, scowling ferociously, drew back his arm to strike.

Then he toppled into the poorly maintained ditch beside the road and commenced to snore.

Another flurry of hoofbeats. Riders swept past along the road. From his knees Wyancott looked wildly right and left to see infantry with leveled crossbows surrounding the halted wagon train in the gloom. The marauders who held his arms let him go and hurriedly raised their hands.

A bandit atop one of the wagons uttered a defiant cry, snatched up a short bow, nocked an arrow, and began to draw upon a tall woman riding up the

road toward Wyancott on horseback. An arrow smote him in the center of the forehead. He rolled off the wagon to lie unmoving in the soft spring grass.

* * * * *

With the exception of the rash Bowman, the bandits surrendered readily. Zaranda dismounted from Goldie, glanced down at the bandit leader she'd sent to sleep in the ditch. She extended a hand to the man with the thatch of white-blond hair, who was still on his knees looking thoroughly confused.

"Up you come," she said as he took her hand and hauled himself upright. "What's your name?"

"Wyancott," he said. He rubbed his jaw, rolled his tongue around in his mouth. "I thank you."

Zaranda nodded. A mercenary with a crossbow slung across his mail-jacketed back, one of the original escorts she'd brought into Tethyr, was kneeling in the ditch and binding the bandit chieftain's hands behind his back. The bandit chieftain snored loudly.

The rest of Zaranda's small but intrepid—she hoped—band was rounding up the demoralized bandits and disarming them. They were beginning to gripe at the realization of just how small a party they had surrendered to. Not that the outcome would likely have been different, save for more bloodshed; so intent had the marauders been on their haul that Zaranda's group had half surrounded them before making their presence known, and likely would have completed the job had not Zaranda feared the leader might hurt the caravaner, and so put him down for his nap. But Stillhawk's dropping of the lone man who showed fight had had a salutary effect on morale.

Which reminds me—Zaranda turned and gestured through the gloom at Chenowyn, who was trudging along the road, looking disgruntled but almost pretty in the simple white linen blouse and green linen breeches Zaranda had bought her, with her dark red hair brushed gleaming and bound back from her well-scrubbed face. She couldn't ride a lick, and hence had been riding postilion behind Zaranda, arms locked firmly about the older woman's waist. She was disgruntled because Zaranda had made her dismount before riding up to engage the bandits.

"Why couldn't I ride with you?" the youth demanded as she approached.

"Because I didn't want you to get hurt. Also I didn't want you to get excited and turn me and Goldie into voles by accident. Now come along."

She took Chen gently by the arm and led her to the wagon beside which lay the man Vander Stillhawk had shot. The mute ranger had his foot on the dead man's face, pulling out his arrow. The task completed, he stood back, scrubbing the recovered missile with a handful of bunchgrass.

"Take a good look," Zaranda said, indicating the dead marauder, who lay on his back staring sightlessly at the first stars appearing in the purple sky above.

Chen craned forward without much interest. "He's dead," she said. "I've seen dead men before."

"Look at him," Zaranda insisted. "You never had a hand in anyone's death before, did you? Well, you had a hand in his."

Chen stared at her. "What are you talking about? I didn't shoot him!"

"No. But you were part of an armed party that engaged him in battle. That entitles you to a share of whatever spoils there are. It also entitles you to a share of responsibility."

Chen's face crumpled, and tear-shine was visible in her eyes, even in the dimness. "What did I do? What do you want me to do, mourn for him?"

"No," Zaranda said. "He got what he had coming. But whether it's something to grieve or not, taking life should never be *easy*."

Chen covered her face in her hands and ran off sobbing. Her tears, Zaranda was acutely aware, were because she thought she had incurred Zaranda's anger without knowing why, not from any emotion concerning the dead bandit. Fine job of moral instruction, there. There are *reasons* I never became a mother.

Stillhawk came up, laid his hand on her shoulder and gently squeezed. She looked into his dark, steady eyes, smiled, touched his cheek.

"Thank you," she said.

She walked back to where Wyancott stood. Balmeric rode past on his chestnut gelding, placing some of the small troop to keep watch in case other bandits turned up, either from the same band or another—always a lively possibility in modern Tethyr. Stillhawk went off to help the lookouts.

Despite the seizure of her own caravan and the attendant financial difficulties, she had managed to interest the former captain of her caravan guards and seven adventurers, including four of her crossbowmen, in following her on her latest wild scheme. In all she had twelve followers, including Chen, Farlorn, Stillhawk, and Shield, who had been waiting at a rendezvous point she and the ranger had arranged in advance, having themselves escaped the city without incident.

Not many to challenge the fabric of a whole country, she thought. She grinned.

"What was that all about?" Goldie asked. The mare tossed her head toward Chenowyn, who stood about twenty paces back up the road, weeping.

"My ham-handed attempt to civilize my young charge."

"I suppose somebody had to take the little beast in hand. I just wish it didn't have to be you."

"Goldie, be nice," Zaranda said. She turned to Wyancott, who was staring. "My horse talks," she told him, as if that explained all. Then back to Goldie: "She hasn't done anything to you."

"Nothing but increase my burden," the mare said primly. "And she rides, I might mention, with the grace of a sack of coal. Come on, Randi, allow me to blow off a little steam. I don't have anything against the girl, really—and I, at least, have not been giving you grief about your orc."

"Orc?" echoed Wyancott.

As if on cue a clamor rose from the other foresters: "Betrayed! 'Ware orcs! Run for it, boys!"

The forest folk were pointing at Shield of Innocence, who stood keeping guard over the prisoners, his scimitars in his clawed hands. His hood had fallen back in the battle, revealing his great head in all its tusked and snouted glory.

"Settle *down!*" Zaranda cried. "He's with me."

A young caravanner glared at her. "Decent folk don't have truck with no orcs! You're evil, just like him!" Several of the others cried assent. Zaranda was glad they hadn't yet gotten their weapons back.

"He's not evil," she said. "He's converted to the worship of Torm—see his medallion? Besides, I don't see what his beliefs or mine have to do with

anything, inasmuch as we just rescued you. Or don't they practice common courtesy in Tethir Forest nowadays?"

Wyancott rubbed his nose with his thumb, "She's right," he said.

His followers subsided into watchful silence. "Thank you," Zaranda told him.

"So what happens now?"

"We each go our separate ways," she said. "However—"

His narrow features closed. "I reckoned there was a however."

"There usually is. We find ourselves in possession of your goods train. We are happy to be able to restore it to you—but we did save you, at risk to ourselves, and we must eat like any others. So I think a recovery fee of ten percent would not be unreasonable."

"That's naught but highway robbery!" protested the young forester who'd objected loudest to Shield.

"No," Wyancott said. "Highway robbery was a moment ago when you had a dirk prodding you in the ribs, sister-son. Like as not it would be well and truly stuck between them now, were it not for these folk."

He looked at Zaranda. "You have the right of it. It's a small enough price to pay, seeing as we thought to be left with nothing at all."

"What ho, Zaranda!" cried Farlorn, who was likewise guarding the captive bandits. "Are we to carry off stacks of dried animal skins and sheaves of bark on our backs? Not to mention that the hides stink worse than your young apprentice did when first you brought her home."

Chen gave off sniffling to glare at him. Zaranda found herself half hoping the girl would set his hair on fire. The bard was far too skillful with words to wound with them accidentally.

"I think," Zaranda said, "we can come to far more satisfactory terms."

Thereupon she declared the bandits' possessions forfeit, by way of compensating the Tethir foresters for their pains. The outlaws proved to have a few coins among them. Their weapons were of generally poor quality, though several swords showed promise that a good cleaning and whetting would render them more than serviceable, and the leader had been armed with a fine spike-headed mace and poniard. Their horses, while not exactly prize destriers and coursers, were valuable enough.

Wyancott, however, was more than happy to trade the spoils from the bandit band for the share of his goods Zaranda had claimed as recovery fee, even though everyone agreed that they were worth more than ten percent of his cargo.

As the weapons and oddments of armor were bundled together and loaded onto the confiscated horses, Zaranda approached her captives, who were all awake and mobile now, standing in a resentful clump in their loincloths and ratty, foul chemises. Farlorn was playing a little game with them, tapping a bandit first on one shoulder with his drawn rapier, then on the other, making him pivot his head frantically from side to side to see what was touching him. Finally he let his blade lie firmly against the bandit's panting neck. The foresters laughed hugely at his expression when he saw what lay against his jugular.

Zaranda glared at the half-elf. Farlorn shrugged, laughed, and put away his sword. "I just thought to lighten the spirits of our newfound friends," he said. "That is, after all, my stock in trade."

"What will you do to us?" the bearded bandit leader demanded.

"You didn't kill anybody," Zaranda said. "So we'll not kill more of you."

Some of the foresters grumbled at this. Wyancott shouted them down.

"What I'm going to do," Zaranda said, "is let you go, with a warning: Do not molest this caravan again, and do not seek to follow us. If you do, I'll burst your lungs inside your chests."

"You're going to just leave us like this?" the bandit leader cried. "Unarmed, naked, and with our hands tied behind us?"

"That's about the shape of it, yes."

"What about poor Fleebo, lying there dead?" another bandit asked.

"Would you care to join him?"

Balmeric sidled up to her and put his head against hers. "Scum like this run in bigger packs," he muttered from the corner of his mouth. "We could maybe get their pals to go ransom on 'em."

"Perhaps," Zaranda answered quietly. "But with some of your men double-mounted on mules, we're not much faster than this wagon train. I don't want to look back to see a troop of kettle-head heavy cavalry riding up our tails."

The mercenary officer pulled a thoughtful face and nodded.

The bandit chief was looking thoughtful too. In his case it was a pained expression. He was a man who didn't readily harbor more than one thought at a time. A new idea had clearly forced its way into his head and was grinding around in there.

"Why are you *really* letting us go?" he asked.

"So you can do what our friends in the caravan will likewise be doing," Zaranda said. "Spreading the word that the Star Company, Protective Services Extraordinaire, is open for business."

The village consisted of a sparse collection of blocky houses. Though it overlooked the not altogether mighty Sulduskoon River, where it bowed away from the eastern tag end of the Starspire Mountains and the forest of Tethyr toward Ithmong, it lay far enough inland that little rain fell, so that instead of the stone and brick walls and pitched tiled roofs of the coastal zone, the buildings had adobe walls and flat roofs.

When Zaranda led her little mounted band into the midst of it on a sun-drenched morning a few days after her escape from Zazesspur, it showed no more sign of life than if it had been abandoned at the time of the fall of Castle Tethyr. The houses were closed up tight with stout wooden shutters. The doors were shut. No pigs, dogs, or even chickens were to be seen on or among the buildings.

"All of this is clear evidence that they need us," Zaranda commented aloud as they reined up in the village common, which was bare, packed earth but for a great spreading oak tree planted many generations before at one edge of the common. "No village is *that* poor."

"What are we doing here, anyway?" demanded Chen, riding behind her.

"Patience, and you'll see." She raised her voice. "Knock, knock!"

For a moment nothing but the wind slapping the mud-brick walls answered her. Then: "Go away," a querulous voice emanated from the nearest house, muffled by the shutters. "We've nothing left worth stealing."

"If I were a determined thief, I wouldn't believe that for a minute," Zaranda said. "But we aren't thieves. We are here to discuss trading with you."

"And what have you to trade?"

"Protection."

Another moment, and then there was the scrape of a bar being withdrawn from a door. A squeal of ill-lubricated hinges, and a weathered gray man stepped out, blinking, into the sunlight.

"We could never afford to pay a band as large as yours to guard us," he said in tones of real regret.

"That's understood," Zaranda said. "That's not what I've come to offer."

A brown-skinned, solemn little girl clad in a ragged smock appeared in the doorway to clutch at the elder's burlap chemise and stare bug-eyed at the intruders. He waved her back inside.

"What then? Will you sell us arms? We have no skill at using them."

"Indeed we have arms to sell you, but that's not all," Zaranda said. "We would teach you how to use them as well."

"Leave off, Osbard!" a female voice cried from the house behind him. "She speaks madness! The bandits will kill us if we try to resist."

"Not," Zaranda said, "if you kill them first."

* * * * *

Despite the dearth of trade in the interior of Tethyr, the village was just managing to straggle along the raw edge of subsistence. Which meant that they were still able to leave some of their acreage fallow, rather than being forced to plant it all, trading off the chance of starving in the future when the land was exhausted against the certainty of starving now. Zaranda stood facing her troops across a field being rested, with the stunted, sunburned remnants of last year's bean crop still underfoot.

"You know, Randi," said Goldie, who stood behind her mistress and watched the proceedings with interest, "it's not too late for us to turn bandit ourselves."

The village volunteers, nineteen of them, of both sexes and various ages, stared with mingled fascination and horror at the spectacle of a talking horse. They seemed to find it as hard to get over Goldie as they did to get over Shield of Innocence.

"Why don't you go graze down by the river?" Zaranda asked out of the corner of her mouth. "You're unsettling the recruits."

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," Goldie declared. "But go ahead; don't mind me. I won't say another word. You people there, with your pots on your heads and your kitchen cutlery clutched in your fists—pretend I'm just another horse."

Zaranda covered her eyes momentarily with her hand. Not for the first time she wondered why she hadn't taken Baron Hardisty up on his offer. It probably had to do with the fact that it helped to be able to look into a mirror when she wanted to brush out her hair.

The mercenaries Zaranda had brought out of Zazesspur stood or lounged about some straw bales that had been dragged up to serve as target practice. Farlorn stood by them, arms crossed and yarting slung over his back, amusing them with a constant low-voiced commentary, probably biting. Shield of Innocence and Stillhawk stood behind her, winged out left and right, with the ranger back a bit farther so that he could keep an eye on the great orc as well as the village volunteers. Chen hovered behind Zaranda, as close as she could and still have reasonable claim of being out of the way.

Collecting herself, Zaranda strode forward to place herself in front of her troops, doing a deft sidestep en route to avoid tripping over an inquisitive yellow hen. The livestock had miraculously appeared on the village streets. The children were still being kept inside at Zaranda's request. She didn't need them hooting and laughing at the efforts of their elder siblings.

"People of Tweyar," she declared. "My name is Zaranda Star. I and my people are here to show you all, men and women alike, how to fight to defend yourselves, your loved ones, and your village. We know we cannot *keep* you away from your field's more than an hour or two a day, so we'll get started—"

"Women can't fight."

Zaranda craned her head. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said, women can't fight. It's a waste trying to teach them to. Like teaching a dog to talk."

"Well, so long as you specify *dogs*," Goldie murmured.

The voice had come from the second rank. "Please step forward so that I can have a look at you."

The speaker didn't seem eager to leap forward, but the pair standing directly in front of him stepped with alacrity to either side, leaving him little choice. He was a young man of middle height in brown chemise and holed tan hose, whose width of chest and shoulders would have been considered huge on a tall man; likewise his belly. His legs by contrast seemed almost comically short and thin. His hair was brown and lank, and a beard fringed his jaw, as broad as Shield's.

"I am Bord, the miller's son," he said sullenly. "And I still say women can't fight. It takes strength to be a warrior. I'm strong."

"No doubt you are, Bord Millerson. But I don't agree that strength is the only thing in combat, or even the most important thing. Many other things matter as well: skill, speed, wind, heart. And most of all, intelligence."

Stubbornly he shook his head. "None of that matters if I hit you with *this*." He held up a fist the size and apparent consistency of an oak burl.

"Ah, but first you have to hit me. Listen well: if strong was better than smart, horses would ride us."

"I find that remark in poor taste, Randi," Goldie said.

"Pipe down."

"Words," the burly youth said, shaking his head like a bull troubled by a blowfly. "Just words."

Zaranda unfastened Crackletongue's scabbard from her belt, took the sheathed weapon by the hilt and held it up. "Let's test it, shall we, you and I? Somebody get him a quarterstaff."

This was done, and in a moment the two stood facing each other before the uneven ranks of villagers. Bord scowled. "You have a sword," he said. "That isn't fair."

"My sword shall remain sheathed," Zaranda said. "That makes it no more than a club—one with shorter reach than that stick of yours."

"How do I know you won't use magic on me?"

Zaranda sighed and resisted the urge to look around at her own party. She had said nothing of magic to the villagers.

"I swear that I will not."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

Zaranda did so. Reluctantly Bord braced his legs wide apart, and took up stance holding his staff two-handed before his belly.

Zaranda tapped his left cheek with her scabbarded sword.

Bord frowned and whipped the staff up and around in a belated counter. Zaranda tapped his right cheek.

"I'm quicker and more skillful," she said matter-of-factly, "and that's twice over that you're dead. Had enough?"

The young man's vast face turned red. He slid both hands to one end of the staff and aimed a whistling blow at Zaranda, who ducked back easily out of harm's way. Bellowing anger, he aimed a fearsome overhand stroke at her; she effortlessly deflected it into the dirt with the flat of her blade. He cocked the staff back over his shoulder for another blow. She poked him in the belly. He sat down in the dust with a vast *thump*.

Zaranda placed the tip of her scabbard on the ground and rested both hands on Crackletongue's pommel. Several of Bord's comrades helped him to his feet. The last that was seen of the miller's son that day was him tottering off for his hut with a supporter beneath each arm.

"It's not just a life," Zaranda said to her friends out of the corner of her mouth, "it's an adventure."

* * * * *

Puffing and scowling with effort, the strapping village lad managed to draw the short bow halfway to his ear. With a yell of triumph, he gave the string a final tug and released. Then he stared dumbly at the arrow, which was still in place, clasped against the bow-staff with one finger.

"You pulled the string out of the nock that time, Emico," Zaranda said gently. "Now, try it again, and take your time."

Stillhawk, his darkly handsome face inscrutable—Zaranda envied him his long practice at showing no emotion—helped the boy nock another arrow and tried to steady his arm as he pulled on the string. Straining and trembling, Ernico got the bow half-drawn again and loosed at the hay bale twenty paces away. The arrow arced high and fell to earth two-thirds of the way to the target.

The mercenaries, now sitting on spare hay bales off to the side, set up a great hooting and sardonic applause at the effort: "Ho there, lad! Is your arm made of whey? That bow's a toy; my five-year-old niece could draw it full!"

The boy blushed until his prominent ears looked ready to burst into flame. He snatched away a fresh arrow proffered by Stillhawk from the quiver on his back, nocked it, heaved with all his might to draw. Puffing, blowing, straining until his whole upper body shook and his face turned purple, Ernico succeeded in drawing it almost to his ear.

"That's it!" yelled one of Balmeric's men, but another jeered and said, "A silver piece he can't get it to his ear."

Ernico grimaced horribly, yanked the string the rest of the way back and, uttering a terrible yell, released.

His final effort had shut his eyes and pivoted him halfway round, however, so that he had come to bear squarely upon the onlooking crossbowmen. They scattered like quail an eyeblink before the arrow buried itself in the bale where one of them had been sitting a moment before.

"Crossbows," Zaranda said to no one in particular, as the mercenaries picked themselves up off the ground and Ernico danced around with the bow held victoriously above his head. "We need to get them crossbows. Anyone can shoot a crossbow."

* * * * *

"Platoon, *forward!*" roared Shield of Innocence.

Like a vast, untidy, many-legged beast, the group of recruits lurched to its feet and into a stumbling run across the furrows of a dormant barley field. Shield scrutinized them with a critical eye, his shadow long, his lumpy form looking somehow majestic against the eye of the setting sun.

Zaranda watched from the side. The troops dashed forward for all they were worth, clutching sharpened sticks to their breasts in lieu of spears. A particularly gawky girl put a foot wrong and went sprawling. The others rushed over her like an avalanche.

Zaranda didn't even wince. Despite the fact that unidentified riders had been glimpsed in the distance, apparently surveying the unprecedented goings-on in Tweyar, she had been sleeping soundly. She no longer heard those horrid insinuating whispers whenever she shut her eyes. Life was good. At least in comparison to what it had been in Zazesspur.

"Platoon—*down!*" Shield bellowed, voice great as a thunderclap. The recruits all went face first in the plowed earth as if they'd been snagged by trip spells.

He has a talent for this sort of thing, doesn't he? Stillhawk signed—reluctantly, Zaranda thought.

"Indeed he does," Zaranda said. Which was fortunate. For all his fighting talent and knowledge of warcraft, Stillhawk was hampered as an instructor by the fact he couldn't speak. Besides, the type of fighting he was most accustomed to was a stealthy, solitary art, demanding the utmost skill and

concentration, and not really suitable for the village recruits to study at this stage of their training. Farlorn was a master swordsman, and no mean hand with a bow himself. With his bard's tongue, he could impart his knowledge more readily than any of them, but he tended to grow bored and wander off along the riverbank, picking wildflowers and composing new songs, or inveighing the village girls with the songs and bouquets those walks produced. Zaranda, with extensive military experience, could plan a campaign or a battle, inspire troops, extemporize and lead an action in the heat of combat. But she had little enough grasp of how to train untried, peaceful folk.

Shield, it seemed, knew just how to go about it. Demanding but not demeaning, stern but evenhanded, he was adept at getting the volunteers to give their best without driving them too hard. And once they got over their instinctive fear of a gigantic orc warrior, the recruits had taken to Shield as if he had been born among them.

Shield ran them back and forth across the field, jerking them up and down like marionettes. The exercise was meant to toughen them, to get them used to operating as a unit, and to accustom them to handling weapons. At length the orog ordered them to stand and looked to Zaranda. She clapped her hands and called out, "Well done, everybody! Let's head for home."

They trooped back toward the village. An ancient man in a kettle helmet—Zaranda would have sworn it was an actual kettle—cleared his throat for attention. He was by far the oldest of the volunteers, and hadn't a tooth in his head.

"Young mistress," he said, "pardon an old fool for asking a fool's question but—why do you do this?"

"There are no fool's questions, save those not asked," Zaranda said, "but could you be a little more explicit?"

The old man frowned a little at "explicit," but he said, "Why are you trying to make fighters of us farming folk? Why not simply protect us yourselves?"

"It's like the old saying, Grandfather," Zaranda said. "Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him his whole life."

The old man frowned in puzzlement until the wrinkles in his face became deep canyons that threatened to swallow his features whole.

"But what," he finally asked, "does all this have to do with fishing?"

Zaranda patted the old man on top of his helmet. "You know, Golban, I bet your wife has ready a pot of beer that's been chilling in the river all day long."

He brightened and stood straighter. "I bet you're right," he said, and set off at speed for home.

At the village outskirts, Zaranda came upon Shield of Innocence sitting in the dust. He had a village toddler on his knee and a pack of others crawling all over his mighty frame. He made a series of ferocious faces at the child he held, rolling his small eyes and opening his tusked mouth alarmingly. The children laughed and laughed in delight.

Zaranda shook her head. "Now I've seen everything," she said to herself. The orog had a talent for more than teaching warcraft, it seemed.

The people of Tweyar had taken Zaranda's party into their homes, while the mercenaries, with some help from the locals, built themselves temporary living quarters. It was the kind of manual labor hired fighters traditionally disdained, but Shield and Stillhawk pitched in. Farlorn lightened the labor by his songs and badinage, though he himself did no work, bards being even more averse

to that than warriors. Besides, the soldiers were happy enough for something to do. It was no arduous labor; given that Tethyr's long and temperate summer lay ahead, the quarters consisted of little more than a couple of plank sheds with roofs to spill rain when the two-week wet season arrived. For their part, the villagers were happy enough to help; the structures could be used for storage when the outsiders had moved on.

Zaranda, however, was quartered in a hut whose lone occupant, a widow, had died not long before the company's arrival. She started to head there and almost ran into Chenowyn, standing in the path looking wan.

"Excuse me, child," Zaranda said, feeling a flash of irritation and starting to push past. She had a great many things on her mind, not least of which was the fact that her rapidly dwindling resources, little offset by the meager amounts the villagers were able to pay, could keep her mercenary contingent satisfied for only so long. And, of course, her creditors would scarcely settle for a share of the grain and livestock that were the villagers' main mode of payment. She had to expand her operations soon, yet to succeed she must make a solid start here in Tweyar... .

She felt a hand on her arm, turned to see Shield smiling at her in the twilight, tusked and benign. "A moment, Mistress Zaranda," the orog said. "Perhaps you're forgetting the education of someone?"

Zaranda frowned and opened her mouth to lash out. Then she shut her mouth and nodded. "Chenowyn," she said, "I'm sorry. I've been neglecting you."

The girl only looked at her, eyes huge and amber in the gloom. Zaranda smiled and took her shoulder.

"Come along, then. Let's review what you've learned of magic so far in your life. And then I'll start you on some simple spells."

Eight days after Zaranda's party came to Tweyar, a bandit gang made good on the prediction uttered by Osbard's wife.

They struck in the early afternoon. Their intent was to catch the villagers lopy with lunch, the traditional Tethyrian noontime siesta, and work beneath the warm sun, then to ride down as many as they could and burn the village, with such other merriment as presented itself. They wanted to provide a striking object lesson for any other village brash enough to try hiring outside protection or organizing a self-defense force.

A score of ragged riders, strung out in crescent formation, found a bare handful of farmers in the fields, and these not far out. The villagers began running as soon as the bandits began cutting like a scythe across the just-planted fields. The riders had no chance of reaching them before they scuttled within the shelter of stout walls of sun-cured mud brick.

"Don't worry!" the chief bandit, a lean, sunburned desperado who wore his blond hair in a scalplock, called to his men. "They'll be eager enough to come out when we pile brush against the walls of their hovels and commence to roast them!"

For good measure several short-bow-armed bandits sent arrows after the scurrying villagers. But the raiders were not true horse archers, skilled in the extraordinarily difficult feat of aiming and hitting a target from the back of a moving mount; that took even more training than learning to draw and accurately shoot a longbow, and any adventure-minded boy or girl of the Dales could tell you that took five years' hard work. They were just horsemen who happened to have bows. They didn't hit anything.

Hooting and brandishing their weapons, the marauders rode through the streets of Tweyar. The field-workers had made good their escape; the bandits had the narrow dirt lanes to themselves. Unmolested, laughing and catcalling, they followed their leader to the well-trodden dirt of the little common before the village hetman's house.

"Ho, Osbard," the bandit chieftain called, "why so coy? Have you some reason to hide your face from old friends?"

Vander Stillhawk rose up from concealment behind the parapet of Osbard's roof and shot the bandit leader through the throat.

As he fell to lie kicking in the khaki dust, Balmeric's crossbowmen, likewise hidden on the village's flat roofs, peppered the raiders with quarrels. Farlorn and Zaranda plied longbows from the houses next to Osbard's.

The bandits wheeled their mounts and fled, leaving seven more of their number unhorsed behind. Two of these lay unmoving where they dropped. The others scrambled up and, clutching at the missiles sticking in them, tried to scramble after their fellows.

The village doors burst open and the village volunteers rushed forth, waving clubs and hoes and shovels and makeshift spears. Screeching with anger pent-up over years of helplessness, they fell upon the injured bandits, bludgeoning, hacking, stabbing.

Zaranda stood up, letting her longbow hang by her side. She was an indifferent archer at best, and had only taken up a bow to add weight to the initial ambush volley. Stillhawk and the half-elven bard kept up their fire, emptying three more saddles before the bandits escaped into dust and

distance. The mercenary crossbowmen set their weapons aside to simply watch.

Out on the common, blood flowed.

* * * * *

Fire leapt in the cleared common before Osbard's house. Hand in hand, villagers and several mercenaries danced around it to the merry tune of Farlorn's yarting, considerably the worse for drink.

Balmeric reeled over to where Zaranda leaned against the front of the hetman's house, a clay mug of the tasty local beer in hand. "Dogs," he said without heat. "D'you know, Zaranda, they actually think *they* won today?"

"They'd better," Zaranda said. "It's why I let them finish off the bandits you and your men unhorsed."

The mercenary leader's long flexible face warped itself into a scowl. "Why would you want to encourage these rabble to pump themselves up and rob us of glory?"

"So they'll quit being rabble as soon as possible," Zaranda said. "They needed to taste victory, or they'd never have faith in what we're teaching them—and more to the point, in themselves."

"But it was our bows that won the day!" Balmeric protested.

"*They* don't know that," Zaranda said, nodding at the celebrating villagers. "Nor do I want them to. Please don't remind them—and encourage your men not to, either."

The mercenary grumbled and looked toward the ground. Zaranda stared hard at him until, as if compelled by her will, he raised his head to meet her gaze.

"Are you so hard-pressed for glory that you insist on claiming credit for winning a back-country skirmish? Bear with me, Balmeric; do as I ask, and I will guarantee you all the glory you could hope for. Or—" she took a swallow of her beer "—at least an interesting death."

For a moment he goggled at her. Then he laughed and slapped her on the arm. "That's the most any commander can truly promise, though few are so candid, I'm bound. Very well, Zaranda Star, you shall have it your way!"

He raised his own leathern jack. "To glory or an interesting death!"

"Glory or death," Zaranda echoed. She bumped her mug against his jack and both drank. Then he slipped off to have quiet words with his men.

Alone for the moment, Zaranda surveyed the scene. From his favorite chair, Osbard observed the dance. He looked careworn and somewhat sour. Near him Shield of Innocence sat cross-legged upon the ground, clawed hands upon thighs like a great idol, ugly yet majestic, sloped brow garlanded with a wreath of wildflowers woven for him by the village maidens.

On the hetman's other side, Farlorn perched on an upended nail keg, his yarting across his knee, and Osbard's eldest daughter, Fiora—a young woman, brown hair bobbed short in the fashion affected by the female volunteers, and who was fortunate enough to have inherited neither looks nor disposition from either parent—draped over his shoulder. Not far away, Chen sat with her hands clasped around her knees, gazing fixedly at the bard. She had rebuffed all attempts at gallantry by the local youths; fortunately they seemed to have taken the message without invoking her wild powers, and now left her alone.

At the moment she seemed altogether absorbed by the handsome half-elf.

Under Zaranda's tutelage she had bloomed into a handsome young woman herself, though coltish still with adolescence, and she had grown less self-absorbed and obsessive in her pursuit of magic—if only because Zaranda had refused to teach her if she didn't. For his part Farlorn had begun dealing with her in terms of good-natured banter rather than his earlier disdain.

Now Zaranda felt a stab of jealousy, and wondered why. Does it matter that much to be the exclusive focus of Chen's attention? Or do I feel old flames rekindling?

Undeniably Farlorn was handsome. Undeniably she was lonely. She had good reasons for refusing to consider resumption of their liaison ... or so she had been telling herself. Now, seeing his face roguish and alive in the light of the fire and an appreciative audience, she wondered if that were true.

The village girl meant nothing to him. There had been plenty such, and would be more; and Zaranda had never been the possessive type. But Chenowyn—graceless, untutored, redheaded, still half-civilized, and prone to seem half-human—had yet some quality to her that would make it hard for even Farlorn to treat her as just another dalliance.

Zaranda looked round the rest of the firelit circle. The face she sought wasn't there. No surprise.

It had been Stillhawk who began sending children, too young to train but old enough not to need adult supervision, some distance from the village as lookouts. One such had spotted the marauders' approach that day, flashing a quick warning back to Tweyar with sunlight reflected in a little mirror—a trick Zaranda had picked up in the Tuigan campaign, where rapid communication was crucial to coping with the fast-moving nomads.

As a hero of the day's epic engagement—for the people of Tweyar realized they hadn't won unaided—Stillhawk had sat through the feast laid out by the villagers. But when the dancing and drinking began in earnest, he had slipped off into the night, uncomfortable with such activities and the nearness of so many people.

Ah, well, Zaranda told herself, you didn't really want to see him anyway. For a moment she had felt that what she wanted was to sit and talk, but that wasn't it. While the bond between her and the mute ranger was strong, it was the blood-forged bond of comrades-at-arms; they were too close to brother and sister for anything else.

"I feel old," Zaranda told the night. And she turned and went off to her hut alone.

* * * * *

One bandit, shot from his horse by Farlorn in a field outside the village, had survived. Once bandaged, he put on a show of defiance, announcing he would never betray his fellows, who would soon enough come and rescue him.

His bravado lasted only as long as it took Shield of Innocence to wrap a great hand in the front of his jerkin and hoist him into the air. Whether or not the bandit was a votary of evil, he was human, with an instinctive fear of orcs. Especially huge and ferocious-looking orcs.

Which is to say, he rolled over like a Calimport roach.

Two nights after the victory celebration, Zaranda mounted four mercenaries and half the village troops on erstwhile bandit horses and rode forth, leaving Farlorn and Balmeric in charge of the village defenses. In the heart of night,

long after moonset, they came upon the bandits' camp near the riverbank. They left the horses in the charge of a female recruit and stole forward to surround the sleeping camp.

Stillhawk and a young villager named Hugh, who was skilled at hunting and reasonably stealthy, dispatched a pair of sentries. Then, half an hour before sunrise, the party stormed the encampment. The first bandits to struggle to wakefulness were sent back to sleep by Zaranda's magic. The few who insisted on showing fight were quickly dispatched, the bulk of the outlaws sensibly surrendering after seeing Shield of Innocence decapitate their doughtiest fighter with his sword-scissors trick.

As simply as that, the Tweyar Self-Defense Force had won its second victory, without cost to itself.

Most of the captive bandits readily accepted parole, agreeing to quit the territory, stripped of arms and valuables but carrying such food as the gang had stocked with them lest, starving, they should be faced with little choice but to return to marauding. The condition was that, were they ever caught again, they would be killed out of hand. The villagers accepted the bargain with an alacrity that surprised Zaranda; apparently the fury of their bloodletting the other day, and the task of cleaning up the grisly aftermath, had left them abashed, with diminished appetite for slaughter.

They were wary when three bandits volunteered to join Zaranda's company. No one in Tweyar could identify any of the three as having committed any atrocities, though, and once Shield of Innocence had described to the erstwhile bandits in terms leaving nothing to the imagination the fate that would befall them should they attempt treachery, even Osbard was reassured. No one, Zaranda Star included, could readily imagine anyone voluntarily running afoul of the monstrous orc. Stern and instant punishment for wrongdoing was very much a part of his god's creed.

With renewed enthusiasm, the volunteers returned to their drill. Zaranda took pains to remind her exuberant troops that they would be extremely lucky ever to gain a third victory at such little cost to themselves as the first two. She could only hope they heard.

* * * * *

The month of Kythorn was preparing to give way to Flamerule when Zaranda and Goldie wended their way toward Tweyar along a trail through the riverside trees. It was a stereotypically beautiful Tethyrian summer evening. A faint pink glow dying in the west was all that was left of day. The air was like perfumed velvet. The sunset swallows yielded to nighthawks, and fireflies winked at one another through the gathering dark. Thin bat cries pierced the murmur of wind in leaves.

They had each had a fulfilling day, though in strikingly different terms. The mare was rhapsodizing over the virtues of the stallions in the pastures where she had passed her day. At last Zaranda shook her head.

"Wouldn't you like to look for a mate such as yourself?" she asked.

"You mean magical? Ha!" She tossed her head and snorted. "I go for the strong, silent type. Dumb all around—that's how I like 'em."

"But how can you bear to couple with others of your own kind who can't talk?"

Goldie turned her head to give her the eye. "Think what you're saying, Randi," she said. "How can you stand to couple with members of your species

who *can*?"

Zaranda sighed, and rode the rest of the way in thoughtful silence.

It was all but full dark when they arrived back in Tweyar. "Looks deserted," Goldie observed.

"In the weeks we've been here, you might've noticed a tendency for country folk to turn in early."

"Where are our people, though?"

"Dining with the locals? It's been known to happen."

The mare's reply was a snort.

At the village stable Zaranda rubbed the mare down, brushed her, and left her with her face happily stuck in a trough of grain. She still saw no sign of human presence. Preoccupied with turning the day's events over in her mind, she paid no especial heed.

When she entered the hut she shared with Chenowyn, it was full dark inside. But she immediately noticed the smell of indifferently washed bodies. Keeping her hand studiously away from Crackletongue's hilt, she shut the door behind her.

Lantern-glow expanded, pressing gloom back into the corners. Osbard and two village elders sat in chairs with blankets covering their laps, looking grim, which told her little; that was their accustomed expression. Ernico and his friend and fellow trainee Rudigar were there as well. Their faces were flushed. They would not meet her eyes.

"Good evening," she told them gravely. "Should I have knocked?"

"Where have you passed this day, Zaranda Star?" Osbard asked gravely.

"At the village of Pansemil, upriver."

The elders exchanged baleful looks. The youths shuffled feet. "And what errand took you there?" asked Storric, a stout, bearded man. Owner and operator of Tweyar's water-powered mill, he was father to Bord.

"I was discussing with them the possibility of training them in the use of arms, as I'm training you."

A hiss of intaken breath. Osbard glanced right and left at his fellows, then back at her.

"So you stand convicted of your treachery," he said, "by your own mouth."

From under the blanket, he produced a cocked and loaded crossbow and aimed it at Zaranda's heart.

A stout stake had been pounded into the packed earth of the village common. Around its base had been piled logs, with plentiful dried brushwood for kindling. Atop this heap stood Zaranda, tied. Before her stood Osbard, holding a lit torch of bound-together reeds.

"Would you mind," Zaranda asked mildly, "telling me what this is all about?"

Stillhawk, hands tied behind him, stood on a three-legged stool with a noose about his neck and the rope's far end tied to a thick limb of an oak. Farlorn was perched on a nail keg, similarly bound and attached to the tree. The mercenaries, also tied, sat in a clump across the common from the hetman's house, guarded by village volunteers armed with spears taken from vanquished bandits. Most heavily watched of all, and garlanded with sufficient rope to rig a Waterdhavian caravel, stood Shield of Innocence, glaring at his captors with eyes that glowed coal-red in the torchlight.

"Whatever you do, Zaranda," the half-elf said cheerfully, "think twice about accepting an invitation to dine with these folk. Such terrific bores: we go to eat with them, and here they've tied us up all evening."

Osbard opened his mouth but couldn't seem to quite find words.

"It's about your treason," offered Moofar, an elder who stood at his side. He was a wizened old bird with a wen on his beaklike nose. "Specifically and to wit, your treating with our enemies, the people of Pansemil."

"By your own admission," Osbard said, emboldened, "you were negotiating to teach them how to attack and overrun us."

"I admitted no such thing," Zaranda replied, "because I did no such thing. I offered to teach them to defend themselves, even as we're teaching you."

"And they mean to use those skills to assail us," said Storric, exploring a broad nostril with his forefinger. "They envy how cultured we are."

"They don't want to attack you. And what if they do? You're strong enough to send them packing, with the knowledge and weapons we've provided."

"It's true, Father!" exclaimed Fiora, who had taken to passing time with Farlorn when she wasn't training. "They'd stand no chance against us."

The hetman blushed and scowled furiously. "Hush, Daughter. Don't speak of matters you know nothing of."

Zaranda laughed. The villagers gaped at her. "I see. Osbard, you sly old kobold, you—you were planning to use our teachings to invade them, weren't you?"

He sputtered and dropped his eyes. "We did, and what of it?" demanded Storric.

"Why should you attack Pansemil?"

"Because," the miller began. He stopped, frowned. "Because—"

"Because they're different!" someone sang out.

"Because they're deviants!" Moofar brayed in a spray of spittle. "Sister marries brother, and they frequently enjoy carnal knowledge of their barnyard animals!"

"Odd," Zaranda said. "They hold much the same beliefs about you."

The Tweyarites squalled with communal outrage: "See! The wretches! Such insolence is not to be borne!"

"I must point out," Zaranda added, "that I've seen fully as much—or as little—evidence of such activities in both places."

Moofar turned white as bleached linen. "Intolerable insult!" he screeched. "Burn her!"

Osbard started forward with the torch, then turned and thrust it into Storric's hands. "You do it."

"Why me?" the miller asked, and promptly handed the torch to Moofar.

In his eagerness to pass the torch back to Osbard, Moofar lost control and had to juggle it briefly to keep it from falling to the ground. "You! You take it. You're the hetman!"

Bellowing elephantine rage, Shield of Innocence began to strain against his bonds. Veins stood out on forehead and stump-thick neck. Ropes parted with a twang. He lunged and with clawed hands caught scrawny Moofar around the neck and hoisted the elder so high that sandaled feet kicked a foot off the ground.

Village volunteers raised the crossbows they had confiscated from Balmeric's mercenaries. Turning purple, Moofar gestured frantically at them to hold their fire.

"Hold!" Zaranda shouted.

Everybody froze and stared at her. "Shield, it's all right. Put him down."

The great orc looked puzzled but obeyed. Stepping back he folded his arms across his chest. Moofar teetered about, feeling his neck.

"Shoot him," he croaked. "Shoot him, shoot him, shoothimshoothimshoothim—"

"No, no, no," Zaranda said firmly. "Nobody's shooting anybody. Now behave yourselves, and listen to me, before I start turning people into newts."

"Um," Osbard said, eyes starting from his head. "You said—newts?"

"Newts," she repeated firmly.

"She's a sorceress!" gasped Storric. "How could you forget such a thing, Osbard? And you call yourself a hetman?"

"I forgot? I? I didn't hear you reminding anyone!"

"If you don't all pipe down and let me have my say," Zaranda said sweetly, "you'll find out why newts so seldom interrupt conversations."

Zaranda could no more turn anyone into a newt than she could turn the hetman's house to solid gold. Under the circumstances, she didn't feel constrained to point that out.

Still fingering his neck, Moofar glared accusingly at her. "You allowed yourself to be taken."

"Of course I did," Zaranda said. "You were starting to get notions. I saw you needed a little talking to, and I wanted to be sure I had your undivided attention."

She raised her head and looked around the common. The mob drew back as if her gaze were hot to the touch.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves," she told them. "We come to your village to teach you to protect yourselves, to throw off the yoke the bandits and the tax collectors of the self-proclaimed nobles have laid upon you all. Yes, we did so for pay; but what we've had from you so far is little more than what spoils you recovered from the bandits—which you would never have gotten without our help. Thanks to us, you need never again cower in your houses at first sight of riders approaching. And this is how you treat us."

The villagers looked suitably contrite. Zaranda was just warming up.

"But that's not truly what you have to be ashamed of. Oh, no. With your

newfound abilities, your new sense of power, all you could think of doing was marching down the river road and afflicting your neighbors with the same depredations you've been suffering at bandit hands all these years. Is that worthy?

"We did not come here to help you conquer. We came to help you become unconquerable. Now, do you let us get on to the next stage, or do you throw away everything we've all worked for, here and now?"

Silence ruled. "It, ah," Osbard said. "Well, it *could* be we've acted a little hastily."

"Could be and is. Now—look at me, Osbard!"

The village chief raised his head as if an anvil were tied to his neck. "Where is my apprentice, Chenowyn?"

"The little bi—the spitfire called up a blight of invisible things that stung like hornets," Osbard said. "We tied her in a sack and threw her in a woodshed."

"Good for her. Now, let her go. And if she's harmed, someone I might name will spend the rest of his days wriggling on his belly in river muck and catching water striders with his tongue."

Osbard turned to the village troops. "Are you deaf? Release the girl at once!"

"And while you're at it," Zaranda said, "best let the rest of us free. Me in particular, the way you folk wave torches around."

The villagers hustled to release the captives. Looking entirely abashed, Errico clambered up on the pile of firewood to cut free Zaranda's hands.

"We never meant to hurt you," he muttered.

"I'm sure that would have been a great comfort had you got the bonfire lit."

She stepped down the pile of wood as regally as a queen descending from her throne. Chenowyn came hurtling out of the darkness, red hair streaming, and caught Zaranda in a fearful embrace.

"Oh, Zaranda!" she sobbed. "I was so scared. You wouldn't really have let them burn you, would you?"

Zaranda hugged her and kissed her head. Then she turned and gestured with one hand.

The torch, which Moofar had somehow managed to hang on to through thick and thin, went out. A beat, and then the bonfire blazed up, untenanted, flames reaching high as the old oak's top.

"No," she said.

* * * * *

"What have we here?" Farlorn Half-Elven asked with a sardonic lift of his eyebrows. "A proclamation?"

"So it would appear," said Zaranda, sitting cross-legged in the oak tree's shade. She held up the papyrus the little village girl had found nailed to a sweet-chestnut tree on the Sulduskoon's bank, four furlongs up the broad, slow river. It was a benchmark of the burgeoning Star Protective Company's success in the region that a child so young could venture so far from the village. Although in truth, had the girl not made so momentous a discovery, she likely would have faced a spanking for straying such a distance without the escort of a brother or sister old enough to wield a spear—which would have been purchased with wealth gained from the revived trade among villages in the limited area under Star's sway.

It was a sleepy-warm noonday in the midst of the month Eleasias,

commonly called Highsun. In fact, most of the two-score trainees under instruction at the moment would already be bedded down under shade for their midday naps had the little girl not run into the village shouting and waving her discovery.

Siestas were not a luxury Zaranda Star could indulge in. Midday break was time for her, between bites of lunch, to continue instructing Chenowyn. And likewise Shield of Innocence, who had become her apprentice in matters military.

She finished chewing a mouthful of apple and read aloud: " 'Be It Known By These Presents—' This is really spelled abominably, but I'll spare you the details. 'Known by These Presents that in the interests of maintaining the Safety and Welfare of the Nation of Tethyr, acting under the authority of the city council of Zazesspur, Baron Lutwill, Ruler of These Lands, Decrees that the Taxes owed by the Inhabitants of these same Lands, and due one Week hence, shall herewith be Doubled.'"

The villagers growled. Farlorn's look was a superior smirk, Stillhawk's stern, and Shield sat beside Zaranda like a stone statue—which was approximately how the three would've greeted news that Zaranda had been made Queen of Faerun, or that a rogue planet was about to smack into Toril. Chen lurked on the outskirts, sitting in the shade of an eave and drawing magic symbols in the dust with a twig, waiting for all this boring military talk to be done so her time could begin.

Zaranda lowered the parchment. "It goes on in that vein, if anybody need hear more."

"What authority has the Zazesspurian city council?" burst out Janafar, a young woman trainee from the village of Dunod two leagues inland from Tweyar. Seated near Zaranda, she was small of stature and trim, but broad shouldered and muscular withal, rather like a compressed version of Zaranda herself. Her honey-colored hair was restrained by a red bandanna. She was quickly becoming adept with spear and short sword, and displayed a positive genius for small-unit tactics.

"The same as anyone," Zaranda said. "All 'authority' consists in the expectation that, if they order you to bend your necks, you'll bend them."

" 'The Nation of Tethyr,' " quoted Byador, shaking his dark, shaggy head. He hailed from Masamont, biggest and most prosperous settlement in the vicinity. His long frame was already rangily powerful, though still gawky with adolescence. He had grown up shooting a short bow, and under Stillhawk's tutelage was learning to handle—and hit targets with—a powerful longbow brought from the forest of Tethir by a Star-escorted caravan. "It's a long time since we heard that."

"I think we're getting a glimpse at the pretensions of Baron Hardisty," Zaranda said, "not to mention his intentions. Now, what can you tell me of this Baron Lutwill?"

Byador snarled and spat. "Loot-well, we call him. He's a bandit and nothing more. But a powerful one, with a hundred men-at-arms to serve him, secure behind stone walls in a castle whose keep throws its foul shadow across Masamont."

Zaranda looked around at her audience, which now included most of her trainees, as well as no few villagers drawn from their naps by the commotion. Her current class, which included Ernico, Fiora, Rudigar, and Bord from

Tweyar, comprised not recruits but cadre, the likeliest youths from the villages that had made compact with Star, who would serve as nuclei for other self-defense forces as the protective company began to expand across Tethyr. While it was not part of their regular curriculum, more and more of them had begun to forgo their own siestas to sit in on the lessons Zaranda gave Shield.

The orog was frankly stupid. Yet Zaranda found him a near-ideal student because he persisted doggedly until he had each and every bit of learning cemented firmly in his mind, and he had no scruples about asking questions when he did not understand—and continuing to question *until* he understood. Routinely, he showed up Zaranda's young human pupils, much more mentally agile though they were, by dint of ironclad study habits and an innate sense that enabled him to grasp the core wisdom of Zaranda's teaching. He set such a magnificent example that Zaranda suspected the siesta sessions had become the most effective part of the whole training program.

"What will you do about this, then?" she asked, waving the parchment.

Trainees and villagers passed a glance around. Zaranda saw shoulders slump, as if her audience were deflating en masse.

"Pay, I guess," Ernico said. "We always have before."

"Why?" Fiora asked, cheeks flushing with anger. "What are we training for, if not to stand up to thieves?"

"Not to get ourselves massacred by trained soldiers with shields, helmets, and mail hauberks," said Byador. "Not to mention men with crossbows shooting us down from the castle walls."

Standing on the sidelines, Balmeric emitted a gravel-in-a-pail chuckle. "Wise lad," he said. "You'd shatter like a glass jug thrown against a wall, pitting yourselves against regulars."

Zaranda cast him a dangerous look. Janafar leapt to her feet. "You can bend your necks to councils, keeps, and crossbows if you like!" she declared. "I at least want to see this castle before I give up all I've worked for."

"Now you're thinking," Zaranda said, nodding serenely. "When in doubt, reconnoiter. When you don't think there's doubt, reconnoiter anyway—you save a lot of unpleasant surprises that way."

She stood up, dusting off the seat of her trousers, and looked to the youth from Masamont. "Now, did I hear you say . . . *crossbows?*"

"There it is," whispered Byador—unnecessarily, since the castle of Baron Lutwill was rather hard to miss.

Lying on her belly in the midst of a thicket of aromatic scrub that did little to keep the afternoon sun from prickling her back through her linen tunic, Zaranda surveyed the scene. Masamont was a collection of a hundred buildings or more, the largest and most central of which were built of stone, with peaked red tile roofs like the coastal towns. Like most of inland Tethyr, the surrounding countryside was flat. Fields green with the long summer's second crops, beginning to fill out, broke up the landscape, interspersed with lines of shade from windbreak trees planted along irrigation ditches and neat orchards of half-ripened fruit.

However, *flat* did not mean entirely lacking relief, like a gaming table in the parlor of a Cormyrean lord; the thicket in which Zaranda and her small band lay hidden topped a slight rise backed by a creek. The prominence from which the castle rose, three furlongs away, was too symmetrical to be nature's work. Zaranda guessed it was an artificial mound, a motte, built at some unguessable remove in Tethyr's lengthy past to provide better outlook and tactical advantage for whatever fortification was first raised upon it.

The manor itself was a bailey, pitched rooftops peeking over a twelve-foot dressed-stone wall, and a stone keep perhaps four stories tall sticking up from the center of it. "You're right," Janafar breathed to Byador. "It's a fortress."

Zaranda withheld a smile. The castle was a step or at most two above her own manor. It lacked flanking towers or crenelations and even at this range she could see that the dry ditch surrounding it was half-filled with trash. A fixed wooden bridge led to the gate, hinting that the baron's mechanics were not up to the task of keeping a drawbridge in repair. By her standards it was pretty weak beer. Yet she understood how invincible and intimidating it appeared to her untempered village warriors.

"I've seen enough," she announced quietly, and slithered back down to the stream. The rest of the party—Stillhawk, Shield, Balmeric, and the three trainees—followed.

Chenowyn awaited on the far side, on the edge of a brushy and neglected woodlot. Zaranda had let her come because Chen refused to be parted from her. The shrubs on the low ridge made her sneeze uncontrollably, so she had consented to watch the horses. She amused herself by making ripples and tiny splashes appear in the water by force of will.

Jumping across the creek, Zaranda gave her a quick frown. She disapproved of Chen's playing unsupervised with her wild talents.

"So what do you make of it?" Zaranda asked her trainees.

They looked at one another and then back at her with anxious eyes. No one spoke.

After a moment, Balmeric said, "We'll never cast it down with our ragtag army, lacking siege engines."

Zaranda pulled a long face. "I dislike 'never.' It's too big for my mind to hold."

"Zaranda will find something magical to do," Chenowyn pronounced proudly.

Zaranda grinned and ruffled her hair. "Magic isn't the solution to all

problems. At least, not *my* magic. But there is a solution." She put hands on hips and looked challenge at the others. "Well?"

"Attack the flank," said Shield.

Balmeric uttered a bark of laughter. "A castle's flank? Ho, that's rich. Even so great a moon-calf as you can plainly see the castle's round."

"Zaranda says there's always a flank," the orog maintained stolidly.

"So she does," Byador said. "But Master Balmeric's right—how can a castle have a flank?"

"Not all flanks are physical," Zaranda said. "Attend me. Even you, Balmeric; you've not seen so much of siegecraft as I have. The thing about sieges is, they seldom end with a successful storming. Ladders and engines and mines aren't what win them."

"What does win them?" Janafar demanded, bursting with impatience.

Zaranda only grinned.

* * * * *

The man rode into the sunset down the indifferently kept-up road, which ran past the castle and on into Masamont. He sported a flamboyant plumed hat, ringleted dark hair that bobbed about his shoulders, grandiose mustachios, and a coat with a riot of colored ribbons pinned down the front. He wore a rapier through his sash and a yarting slung across his back. He cantered his mount, a striking palomino mare with a long and lustrous white mane and tail, up to the two spearmen who stood guard before the castle gate, and halted on the bridge.

"Greetings, gentles," he said, sweeping off his hat and bowing long from the saddle. "I hight Fyadros, the Incomparably Wonderful Bard, and this is Zizzy, the Wonder Horse."

As if in greeting, the mare bobbed her head three times, making her forelock bounce, and thrice smote the wooden bridge with a dainty hoof. The guards gaped.

"What brings you this way, good bard?" asked one, too overawed by the splendor of this apparition to remember his obligation, as a member of a rural robber baron's entourage, to be rude and overbearing at all times.

"We seldom see the likes of you hereabouts," echoed his companion, similarly stricken.

"Indeed, that's evident by the quaint way your jaws hang down to your hauberks," the bard said. "What brings me is my whim, which rules with a hand of iron; I come from here, and there, and everywhere. Just now I feel the winds of adventure blowing me to Zazesspur, whence I shall take ship for the wondrous realm of Maztica."

The guards looked at each other. "Do you think," asked the one on the right, "that you could stay a night or two? We don't get much by way of entertainment out here."

"The village women hate us, the trollops," the other said. "They give us nothing we don't take at poniard-point."

"Indeed? Such strapping stalwarts as yourselves?" The bard stroked his long chin and looked thoughtful. "It could be that I might be induced to bide the night here, if nicely asked."

The guard on the right turned and bellowed for an errand boy to go and fetch the chamberlain. While they waited, Fyadros entertained the guards with improbable tales of a halfling who attempted intimacies with a firbolg maid.

At length the great oaken gates groaned open behind them. A slight middle-aged man in a black robe stood there. He had receding dark hair, white-touched at the temples, and a wisp of mustache. A dirty, skinny boy peeked past a gate valve behind him.

"I am Whimberton," the man said in a thin voice, "chamberlain to Castle Lutwill and the ever-glorious, to say nothing of -victorious, Baron Lutwill. Who might you be?"

"He's a bard," the guard on the right said.

"He has a Wonder Horse," added the one on the left.

"I am of course Fyadros, the Incomparably Wonderful Bard, and being of generous disposition only mildly miffed at not being recognized at once, seeing what a backwater this is."

"Of course I recognize you, good Fyadros," the chamberlain said smoothly. "It was only that poor light momentarily dulled my sight. What might I do for you?"

"Your guards hinted you might care to beseech me to pass the night within and brighten your dull and meaningless lives with my stories and songs, which are, it goes without saying, incomparably wonderful."

"Without saying," agreed Whimberton with a nod.

"He told us this great story," said the guard on the left. "See, this halfling fancied a firbolg wench, so he took a bucket—"

The guard on the right poked him in the ribs with the butt of his spear. "Enough! His Excellency the chamberlain don't want to hear that story! Least, not from the likes of you. You always get the punch lines wrong."

"Do not!"

"Do so."

"Be silent," Whimberton said conversationally, "or I'll have your backs scourged raw, roll you in rock salt, and heave you into the pigsty for the night."

"I could, of course, abide in night's jeweled pavilion, shaming the crickets with my songs," Fyadros said. The mare raised her head and whinnied as if in agreement.

"Be not hasty, fair Fyadros," said Whimberton hastily. For all his languid manner he liked a ribald ditty as well as the next man, and entertainment lay pretty thin on the ground, out here in the sticks of strife-torn Tethyr. "In the name of my lord and master, the ever-glorious and -victorious Baron Lutwill, I bid and beseech thee to enter these precincts, and stay and amuse us so long as your heart desires."

The bard looked thoughtful, then nodded. "I suppose I shall. Though 'amuse' is a paltry word for what I shall do to you."

"You're half-elf, aren't you?" the chamberlain asked, studying him through twilight. "We don't see many of them with such impressive mustachios."

"I have many attributes," Fyadros declared airily, "and every one is unique and wonderful. Shall we proceed within?"

"To a certainty. Follow the lout; he'll lead you to the stables."

"Ooh, I'm going to get you for this," Goldie promised *sotto voce* as they passed through the torchlit gate in the ragged boy's wake. "Zizzy, the Wonder Horse?"

"A spur-of-the-moment improvisation," Farlorn the Handsome replied in a murmur audible only to the mare's great rearward-swiveled ears. He gave a quick surreptitious scratch of his thumb tip to his upper lip, where the glue that

held his false mustachios in place made him itch. "Now hush, lest you spoil our little game."

* * * * *

In her fragrant covert atop the little rise, Zaranda felt a pang as she watched the gates shut. Whom for? she wondered. Farlorn or Goldie?

"They're in," she said, sliding down the back slope on her rump.

Stillhawk rose from where he squatted, watching star reflections at play in the creek. He gave Zaranda a look, which she steadily returned. Then he jumped onto his horse and vanished into the dark.

I know you don't like it, my friend, Zaranda thought. But you're likeliest to get through to summon the others. They mustn't go astray, with Farlorn and Goldie inside the beast's belly.

She glanced back to the top of the rise, where Byador lay alone keeping watch on the castle. She fought the impulse to climb up and rejoin him. He would not gain self-confidence until he bore responsibility alone.

So she was left with her thoughts, and Shield and Chen, who would not be parted from her. She was glad for the great orc's presence. His eyes saw farther at night than any human's, and if trouble found them she could ask for no better blade, or pair of blades, at her back.

Willy-nilly, she had come to trust him as she trusted Stillhawk, though the ranger still hated the orog.

Not that trouble was likely. That very morning Zaranda and her tiny band had watched the heavy wooden gates swing open and half Baron Lutwill's complement of soldiers march forth to begin collecting the increased taxes the posted parchments had announced. With forces much reduced the *soi-disant* baron had also perforce decreased his patrols, which were in any event predictable, throughout the countryside. And the people of Masamont tended to keep behind heavily barred doors by night, for fear of chance meetings with the baron's men, which seldom went to the towsfolks' advantage.

Still, there remained the small and gnawing chance that they had been seen and betrayed, or espied by magic, or that a tax-collecting band, returning for some reason unforeseen, might stumble across their covert. Just such random events had altered the outcome of half a hundred conflicts, from duels to the meeting of great armies. That was why Zaranda put so little faith in plans drawn elaborately up before the fact.

She sighed and sat down. Chen looked up at her and smiled, her pale, freckled face seeming lightly self-luminous in the last lingering light of day.

"Will you let me go with you?" the girl asked.

"No. We've talked this out before. You've not yet learned enough." Though the girl had been trying, painfully hard. It was as irksome to her quicksilver nature to toil laboriously to learn as it was natural for Shield. Yet she had done so with no less dedication than the orog.

"But how will I ever become a mage if I never put what I know into practice?" Chen wailed.

"That's a fair question. You cannot. And still—the time isn't now."

Chen expelled a huffing breath and turned away. Zaranda laid a hand upon her shoulder. "Now, come. Let's review what you've learned of the incantation that sends your foes to sleep. It's not infallible, and won't work at all against foes who are very powerful or mighty in magic. Yet, day in and out, it's one of the likeliest to save your life...."

* * * * *

Half an hour after midnight—by which time Zaranda's nerves were drawn as taut as fiddle strings and scraped as by a bow, for fear the signal would arrive before her forces—the horses in the wood lot raised their heads and pricked their ears. They uttered no giveaway whinnies of greeting; their muzzles were wrapped in soft cloth, another trick Zaranda had learned from the Tuigan horse-barbarians.

Shield said nothing, but stood up with scimitars star-gleaming suddenly in his hands. Zaranda lifted up Crackle tongue in its scabbard, which she had unbelted, and stood up more slowly.

The assault group picked its way carefully if not noiselessly through the brush. They were Protective Company volunteers and Balmeric's mercenaries, numbering fifty in all—half Zaranda's cadre-in-training among them. All had volunteered, but she didn't want to risk losing many of her best pupils; even victory could cost dearly. They had drawn lots for the honor of accompanying her.

It nearly broke her heart. They had no idea what they were getting into, not down in their guts where it counted. Many of them had by now seen combat with marauding bands, been wounded, seen comrades die. But battle against trained soldiers, even barracks sweepings such as would accept service with the likes of Baron Lutwill . . . she hoped the survivors did not look back in bitterness on their eager naivete.

The company dismounted and muzzled and hobbled the horses. Zaranda had as yet no true cavalry beyond herself. But after facing the horse-borne Tuigans, she mounted her own troops for mobility's sake, though they fought afoot.

Stillhawk was somewhere out in the night, prowling round the castle walls, alert for unforeseen events. He was nearly as unseeable, wrapped in his elven cloak and mastery of stealth, as if he'd had a spell of invisibility cast upon him. With nothing more to do, Zaranda wrapped her own cloak about her and settled in to sleep.

* * * * *

The air was cool and heavily still. The only sounds, besides the muted drumming of hooves, were the trill of field crickets and the distant spectral voicings of an owl. The moon had set before midnight—fortuitous that Lutwill had picked yesterday for sending forth his tax collectors.

Since her troops could not rival Stillhawk in stealth, Zaranda had decided on a rapid approach, rather than trying to creep across six hundred yards of open ground. Her riders had muffled their mounts' hooves, but there was a limit to how quietly fifty horses could trot.

As they neared the walls, Zaranda's skin felt as if it were bunching at the nape of her neck in expectation of a sudden shout of discovery, or perhaps the deadly compound hiss of a volley of crossbow quarrels. But they reached the gate without incident. As she dismounted and crossed the wooden bridge on foot, a knotted rope slithered down the wall's stone face. She climbed quickly up.

Farlorn reached a hand to help her over the top. "Forgive the lateness of the hour, milady," he said, swaying slightly. He was still got up in wig, hat, false mustachios, and ludicrous coat. "Mine host is a true hero where reveling is concerned."

With soft thumps, rag-wrapped ladders were laid against the walls. The assault group began to clamber up. The seldom-oiled gate hinges were too loud to risk opening until after the alarm was raised.

"You're drunk!" Zaranda said in a startled whisper.

"The good baron took it in mind to put to the test certain tales concerning the capacity of bards for—excuse me—drink. I could hardly disappoint the man, now, could I?"

He leaned so far back he threatened to topple into the courtyard. Zaranda grabbed his sleeve. "Are you in any condition to fight?" she asked.

He nodded down the catwalk. A figure lay sprawled amidst a dark patch spreading on stone. "I'm fit enough to murder," he said. "Two, in fact: all the sentries our arrogant Baron Loot-well thought needful to guard his walls by night. And drunk or sober, few men can match steel with Farlorn Half-Elven."

The raiders were beginning to filter into the yard down stone stairways. Just let me get a few more of my people inside, Zaranda prayed to unspecified gods, and it won't matter that they lack experience or even preponderance of numbers—

And perhaps Armenides of Zazesspur was right and Ao had taken up an active interest in the world. As if in instant negation of her prayers, there rang a shout of, "Ho! *Intruders!*"

The *thrum-thump* of a releasing crossbow sounded, followed by a stomach-clutching *thunk*. And a youthful volunteer pitched screaming from the top of the wall.

Across the courtyard, a single man stood in the opened door of a long, low stone building, evidently a barracks. No lights shone from within, but startled cries emerged as men struggled out of sleep to grope for weapons.

Zaranda's lips moved, near-noiselessly. As the man bent down to try to re-cock his bow by hand, she flicked a tiny pellet from her fingertips. It sped over his back with unnatural accuracy and exploded into the red hell-glare of a fireball spell.

The blast hurled him into the middle of the courtyard. Behind him, screams.

A giant shadow loomed beside her: Shield, scimitars in hand. "Take a detachment and try to block the barracks exits," she told him. Though a fireball spell did its deadliest work confined by walls, she dared not hope to have killed or incapacitated everyone inside.

For two heartbeats his eyes held hers, aglow with the fires flickering inside the barracks. He hated to leave her side in the heart of battle, but he had pledged his troth to her. He turned and barked out the names of squad leaders as he hurried down the steps.

With a squeal of tormented metal, the gates began to open beneath Zaranda's feet. Surprise gone, the remaining raiders had to get inside as quickly as possible. Some still clambered up the ladder. Zaranda leaned down to help Fiora over the top.

She heard a deep hum and the plangent clatter of a steel-tipped quarrel striking rock. Even as the metal rang, a longbow uttered a deep-voiced *twang* of response and a scream spurted from the tower. A cross-bowman had tried to mark her down from the safety of an arrow loop.

Stillhawk stood behind her, bow still upheld. He nodded acknowledgment to her grin of thanks. At this range, the narrow shooting loops gave only an illusion of cover where the woodsman was concerned; if you could see to shoot through it, he could put an arrow in your eye.

Unfortunately, with the exception of Farlorn sober, the ranger was the only marksman among them with nearly the skill for that feat. A few crossbowmen in the keep could massacre her youthful volunteers in the open courtyard. She dashed downstairs and toward the keep, Crackletongue in hand.

The door at the tower's base was iron-bound oak, and likely a hand or more in thickness. The hinges were on the inside—which meant the door opened inward, a weakness, but likewise prevented an attacker from forcing it open with two quick strokes of a sledgehammer to burst the hinges. Doubtless a massive beam set in brackets barred it within. It would take long minutes for the strongest man to batter through it with an axe.

Zaranda was prepared for this one. She flung forth her left hand, spoke words of command. She *felt* the heavy beam, bound it to her will, willed it to rise, heard the startled outcries from within.

She felt the bar come free, let it drop outside the brackets, powerless to do more. She raised a foot and gave the door a furious kick.

Her door-opening spell had dumbfounded the defenders; none thought to hurl his weight against the door. It swung ponderously open. Zaranda charged inside.

A pale blur in candlelit gloom, a face startled beneath a steel cap and within a mail fringe. Zaranda slashed it across. Its owner staggered back, howling.

Zaranda caught him by the hauberk and shoved him against mates trying to close from her left, while Crackle tongue, alive with blue-white fire, did deadly work to her right.

A clang, a clash, a bellowing cry, and she was through to the steps that wound upward. She lunged up three, turned back to parry a spear thrust with her blade, grabbed the ashen haft, and slew the wielder with a forehand stroke. Reversing her grip on the spear, she threw it.

It was a clumsy cast, left-handed, and did no one harm. It wasn't intended to. It *did* make the clot of guards jump back, which was her intent. Before they could recover, she reached in her pouch and flung a fistful of skunk-cabbage leaves in their faces, uttering an incantation. Thick green smoke swirled up from the leaves, surrounding the guardsmen, who began to cough, retch, and weep uncontrollably. Her own eyes streaming from the fringe effects, Zaranda bolted up the stairs.

A story up, she came upon a guard swinging a cocked crossbow away from a firing loop to aim at her. She hurled herself at his legs and tackled him. They lay on the floor writhing. The man was shorter than she but had strength on her, and kept stupidly trying to force his weapon to bear on her instead of beating her over the head with it. His breath and body stank in her nostrils, and his garb was greasy to her touch.

She succeeded in rolling atop him. At once she saw a second soldier standing in the middle of the round chamber, pointing a crossbow at her by the light of a single reed torch. Frantically she threw herself to the right, dragging her opponent's body over hers by sheer force of will. The crossbow thumped. The man Zaranda was wrestling with yelled in anguish as the bolt pierced his back and pinned him to the wood-plank floor.

Fortunately it missed Zaranda. She eeled out from under him and lunged for the other. This one had wit to drop his now-useless weapon and grab for his dirk. Crackle tongue's point took him in the throat before he could draw.

There were straw-stuffed pallets strewn about the floor, as well as empty wine bottles and discarded crusts of bread and cheese. Breathing through her mouth, Zaranda grabbed up one of the pallets. Hoping few vermin were migrating into her hair and clothing, she continued up the stairs that wound around the inner side of the keep wall, holding the pallet before her.

As she came to the next level, she cast it up and into the chamber. Crossbows twanged. Zaranda popped up, flung a pinch of fine sand from the river bottom, shouted words. Three guards collapsed into slumber.

Rubber-legged more from magic-making than exertion, Zaranda caught up the pallet again. A blue flash split the night outside, the glare through the arrow loop turning the chamber momentarily day-bright. Thunder cracked like the world breaking open.

Through ringing in her ears, Zaranda heard screams from outside. Someone was loosing potent magic against her people. As she paused, the lightning lashed out again.

Frantic, she dashed upstairs. A guard waited at the next floor. She threw the pallet over his head and put her shoulder into him, thrusting him back against the wall. His helmeted head struck stone with a clang.

Ten feet away, another soldier had just finished hooking the thick string of a crossbow into the claw that held it cocked. He had not had time to drop in a bolt. As Zaranda rushed him he threw the weapon down and snatched up a

spear.

He thrust at her. She put her weight back, skidded, stopped. He jabbed at her again. She parried. Behind her, she heard the first soldier cursing and floundering. Apparently he was coming out second-best in his contest with the pallet.

Zaranda threw a looping wild cut at the man's eyes.

He ducked his head back out of harm's way and, whooping with triumph, drove his point for her unprotected body. Crackletongue whirled around and slashed his leading arm. He howled, and lost his grip with that hand. She cut him down before he could shift grip for a one-handed stab.

The other guard finally escaped the pallet. Zaranda knelt, caught up the fallen crossbow, plucked a quarrel from a wall-mounted rack, and slotted it home. As the guard charged, she shot him through the body. He cried out and fell backward down the stairs.

Blue lightnings stabbed and crashed outside. Some sort of potent magic artifact was clearly in play here. No one's mind could hold so many spells of such cogency. At least, no one who'd be keeping the company of a hedge-robber like Lutwill.

Her urgent mission had abruptly changed from an effort to safeguard her youthful warriors from cross-bowmen to stopping whatever magic was being unleashed against them. For the first time, she wished she'd actually brought helpers with her into the tower, rather than charging in alone—and sealing the entrance behind her with a persistent stinking cloud spell.

More cautiously, she advanced up the final set of stairs, sword in hand. Blue flames danced along both edges of Crackletongue's blade. There was evil afoot here.

What she most feared was to find another stout door sealed against her; she had used up her magic for that. But the heavy trapdoor that might seal off the penthouse from the rest of the keep was thrown open, inviting.

Too inviting; she wasn't that ingenuous. She gathered herself, pantherish on strong haunches, then launched herself upward in a mighty leap. It carried her up through the entry hole and beyond. She tucked a shoulder and rolled as a blade clashed on the floor behind her.

She fetched up against the wall amid a pile of furs that smelled worse than they had when attached to their original owners. Clearly hygiene was not a matter much on Baron Lutwill's mind. A young woman cowered nearby, naked but for a bearskin clutched against her, straw-colored hair hanging limp in a scared, blank face.

"Keep out of the way," Zaranda told her. "We'll get you free of this."

The penthouse was a larger version of the filthy barracks on the second floor, though more sumptuously furnished. Instead of straw pallets, furs and stained silk cushions lay scattered across the floor. On the walls hung once-fine tapestries that, it appeared, had seen much use for the wiping of greasy fingers. The discarded wine bottles were of a better vintage than the ones on the lower floor, but the crusts and mold-green cheese rinds and gnawed joints were much the same.

The windows were much larger than the arrow loops below, glazed with heavy age-wavy panes set in lead. These were apparently stout; an arrow crashed against the pane and made a mere bird-beak clack before it fell harmlessly away.

A slight man in a black robe stood by the window. He was a mage, to judge by the large sphere he held up to the window. Its surface was alive with opalescent fire, but the light that cast fiendish highlights over his bearded face was blue—the same blue as the lightning-bolt that stabbed down outside as Zaranda watched.

Somehow the black-robed man was controlling the lightning with his sphere. Zaranda summoned the last bit of magic she had in her, preparing to send him a magic missile where it would do the most good.

A huge shadow loomed up before her, blocking her aim. "Die, interloper!" it roared, and hacked downward savagely with a great double-bitted battle-axe.

She rolled aside. The blade crashed down, cleaving valuable if dirty pelts. She came to the balls of her feet, crouching, Crackletongue held before her. The axeman turned to confront her.

He was tall, taller even than Shield. He had a mashed-in nose and dark eyes almost hidden beneath bushy brows. Black mustaches swept ferociously back across his cheeks to join with his sideburns, leaving his chin bare. He wore a steel cap, a mail hauberk like his men's, buckskin trews, and boots of some stout, scaled hide, possibly dragonet. His paunch was majestic. The heft of chest and upper shoulders was hard to judge, since he wore a black bearskin vest. Judging from the size of his bare arms, he was doubtless sturdy enough.

"You must be the one who calls herself Countess Morninggold," he said, swishing the axe in the air one-handed before him—seemingly careless, inviting attack. "Zazesspur will reward me mightily when I send them your head preserved in vinegar."

"Cheapskate," Zaranda said, trying to crane past him to get a clear shot at his wizard. Reading her intent, he kept shifting side to side with an agility that belied his bulk. "Brandy works much better."

"I doubt you're worth the cost, frankly," he said in his oddly pleasant baritone voice. "But you might provide some diversion if I don't kill you at once."

Suddenly he held the axe's yard-long helve in both hands and was whipping the head toward her face with the sheer awesome strength of his wrists alone. The blow would have cloven her to the breastbone had it landed. Expecting such, she had read the signs in his body motions and threw up Crackletongue with her left hand bracing the back of the blade. Impact drove her to her knees.

At contact, the saber flared and crackled with lightning. Evil! Zaranda thought.

Immediately the big man retracted the axe for a follow-up, finishing stroke. Zaranda fell back, braced herself with one hand, and stabbed with the other. The baron went tiptoe to avoid the thrust and jumped back, giving her time to scramble to her feet.

They squared off, feinting left and right, each trying to provoke the other to commit to an attack. Zaranda quickly sensed she was the more skillful, but he was quick as well as horribly strong, and her attention kept getting distracted by the desire to do something to interfere with the wizard at the window.

The combat continued thus, inconclusive, for what seemed like hours but was probably seconds. Then the baron, noticing the glances his opponent kept darting past him, growled over his shoulder, "Ho, Whimberton! Leave off

that play and make some magic so I can put this wench out of the way and deal with her minions myself."

The wizard jerked as if slapped. Lowering the opalescent sphere with visible reluctance, he turned to Zaranda and began to gesticulate and mutter. Frantically, she tried to get a clear shot to cast her own remaining spell, but Baron Lutwill, grinning savagely, launched a fierce attack, forcing her to concentrate exclusively on keeping her skull unsplit.

Whimberton threw out his hand. The air seemed to congeal abruptly around Zaranda, freezing her in place. A holding spell! She fought back with all her will, but her exertions, magical and physical, had sapped her. In a moment, she was trapped.

The baron stepped back, leaned on his axe for a moment, admiring his magician's handiwork. "Hmm. Since I didn't have to damage you at all, maybe I won't be so quick to separate your head from that lovely slender neck. After all, I can always collect the reward." He turned away. "Well done, Whimberton. Now you can get back to your games. But see you don't use up all the juice, or whatever it is that drives that thing."

The mage smiled. "It is dweomer, Lord, the stuff of all magic. Yet this object can be recharged merely by attaching it to the weathercock when a thunderstorm rages."

The baron gestured airily with a hand. "Whatever."

He turned back to Zaranda, began to caress her cheek. "You know, this has interesting possibilities—"

A scream interrupted him. Zaranda could not move so much as her eyeballs, but she could focus vision past her captor, to the window where the mage had raised his sphere once again. He was surrounded by a swarm of tiny, indistinct things that seemed to shimmer with a faint light of their own. He beat at them, frantically, then began to slap at his face and robe, shrieking louder and louder, until he stumbled and fell back against the window.

Whoever installed the window had not worked up to the exacting standards of Tethyrian artisanship. It gave way at once. Window and mage fell out into the night, the latter trailing a thin dwindling scream.

The spell broke. Zaranda drove a knee into the baron's crotch. He bent over with a gasp and staggered back, but recovered almost instantly, and swung his axe horizontally.

Zaranda leaned away, going to one knee. Her free hand found a wolfskin. The axehead whistled by, a finger's width from her face. She flung the pelt over the baron's head and shoulders and stabbed her glowing blade right through it.

Again. And again.

At last, when for some time the only cries sounding within the chamber had been her own and the voices coming through the now-vacant window, she stopped and turned. Chenowyn stood in the doorway, face so pale her skin looked like a sheet of parchment and her freckles like drops of paint.

She flew forward to catch Zaranda in a wild embrace. "You disobeyed," Zaranda said, hugging her tight. Then, to her own astonishment, she burst into tears.

* * * * *

Ten volunteers died in the fight for the castle, including Osbard's daughter Fiora, blasted by a lightning bolt. Many more were wounded. So brutal was

the battle that Goldie, released from the stables, forbore to complain about the indignities Farlorn had heaped upon her in the course of their masquerade.

But whatever the cost, they had won. And once the news of what had transpired reached Masamont, the villagers streamed forth to take up the casualties, bind their wounds, and bear them gently off to their own beds, where the local clerics could see to healing them.

What the wondrous rechargeable magic artifact Whimberton had used to such deadly effect was, Zaranda never learned. It had shattered on a paving stone beside its wielder.

Despite the horror of seeing friends die and suffering magic attacks they were powerless to prevent, the young warriors were exultant. Even the wounded laughed and joined in the singing as the townsfolk carried them to the village on improvised litters.

That would pass, Zaranda knew. When the hot rush of victory died away, the despair that came after would be as hard for some to bear as the pain of sword cuts and spear thrusts. With the help of Farlorn's gold-glib tongue, Zaranda would help them through that ordeal as best she could.

When the time came. But meantime, after the wounded were taken off and the castle secured, in that breathless hour before dawn, Farlorn came to her, in an apartment she had chosen to take sorely needed rest.

And it seemed to Zaranda Star the most natural thing in the world to go into his arms, and surrender herself to the hunger that had been growing in her for long, weary months.

Part III
The Whisperer in Darkness

"We are troubled," the halfling in the maroon and purple gown piped.

Sitting in a simple chair in his eight-sided chamber at the top of the Palace of Governance, Baron Faneuil Hardisty turned away from a design sketch for his coronation robe and regarded his trio of visitors. They stood in a ray of spring sunlight that slanted from the skylight to graze the tabletop on which the baron's model city stood.

Malhalvadon Stringfellow, the only halfling currently seated on the city council, hopped impatiently from one bare black-furred foot to the other. Baron Zam stood unmoving in his robes of blue and gray. He was tall, astringent, bloodless, with a wisp of iron-gray hair surrounding the dome of his skull. His slit eyes, narrow nose, and pinched mouth were situated on a face that came to a severe point at the chin. Korun, the lone councilwoman, wore a slashed green-velvet doublet over a yellow blouse and orange hose, her hair blonde and short, her eyes green, and her pert-nosed face handsome. She wore her peaked yellow cap at a rakish angle, pheasant feather aslant, and held arms akimbo, as if impatient but amused. The sunlight, ungallant, brought forth the parchment dryness of her skin; she was not so young as she liked to present herself.

Baron Hardisty sighed and handed the sketchbook to his attendant Tatrina, daughter of Duke Hembreon. He had many All-Friends waiting upon him these days, courtesy of Armenides, who stood behind his right shoulder and beamed like an indulgent tutelary spirit. Tatrina made a curtsy and withdrew. Armenides's hazel eyes followed her until she was out of sight around the columned doorjamb.

Koran and Zam likewise watched her go, with much different expressions. Each had a son in the All-Friends. Neither felt entirely at ease with that, but they were reluctant to mention it in Armenides's presence.

"What troubles you, noble Stringfellow?" Hardisty asked with that great apparent sincerity that served him so well.

The halfling bobbed, tousled his curly dark hair, rubbed his snub nose with a thumb. "It's these Star Protective people," he declared. "They're a threat to our plan to restore order to Tethyr."

"Meaning," Lady Korun said in a mockingly vibrant contralto, "that they interfere with the bandit chieftains who kick back a share of their plunder to you and call it 'taxes.'"

"No such thing!" the halfling fluted. "Besides, I'm not the only one."

"Let us say we all feel the pinch," said Zam, and *pinched* was a fair description of his voice. "Her impertinence becomes alarming. Her private army grows in leaps and bounds, and just today we received word that she has been welcomed by the city council of Ithmong, having escorted a great caravan thence from Myratma. The first to pass that way since the monarchy fell."

"She's a sorceress!" Stringfellow cried. "She's got the people bewitched, I tell you. She even has them believing that monstrous orc who travels with her is a paladin!"

"She's done much to restore commerce to the roads of Tethyr," Korun said, "and it's all bypassing Zazesspur. At this rate, the people of Tethyr, to say nothing of Zazesspur, will soon begin to wonder what they need us for."

Clearly this can't go on."

"What do wish me to do about it?" Hardisty asked mildly.

"You're the man who would be king, Faneuil," Lady Korun said. "You tell us."

"Very well," Hardisty said crisply. "She shall be dealt with. Enough?"

"And who will do the dealing?" Stringfellow asked.

Hardisty grinned. "Why, I should say—none less than the lord of Zazesspur."

"You ask much," Baron Zam said.

"He will deliver much," Armenides said serenely. "He is touched with destiny."

"He'd best be," said Zam.

* * * * *

"Our Malhalvodon grows importunate," Armenides said when the councilors had gone. "Perhaps it's time he gave way to one of the Brothers Hedgeblossom. Or both. Surely the council has other bits of deadwood that want pruning."

"You surprise me, Father. The Hedgeblossoms are our staunch foes. They seek to overturn everything we've worked for."

Armenides smiled. "Why, isn't that all the more reason to bring them on the council? In every time and every clime, there's nothing scarcer than a rebel who stays avid to cast down power once he shares it."

Hardisty thought about this. Like many things Armenides told him, it sounded bizarre at first, until his mind began to fit itself around the concept.

"What of the other council members? Some of them might object to raising up such firebrands."

The priest spread his hands. "Then they are obstructers and unworthy of the positions they hold. Retribution has a way of seeking such out."

Here was a different Armenides than the ever-smiling figure the public knew, but one in truth no less benevolent. The common ruck might not understand, but Hardisty did.

He had done things he was uneasy about. Some even gave him nightmares. But he knew the truth of what Armenides taught: when one served Good, to hold back from using any tool available was dereliction to the point of affirmative evil. Just as one must sometimes spank a child less it race heedless into the path of an oncoming carriage and be trampled, so sometimes apparently cruel measures were in truth grandmotherly kindness.

"You must keep pressure on the council to crown you king as soon as possible, my lord," the cleric said. "The One Below has great patience, but even that wears thin. And we have much need of him yet if we are to bring your visions to fruition."

Baron Hardisty shuddered, as he always did at mention of the hidden partner in their great enterprise. Politics made strange bedfellows: just look at that stiff-necked old tower of rectitude Hembreon and that rogue Anakul. The way the two voted in council, you'd think they sat next to one another in temple.

Him Below could be ... handled. Armenides assured him of it.

"First I've got to settle this matter of the Countess Morninggold," Hardisty said. "Despite what I told our friends, I really don't know how."

He shook his head. "I suppose it's too late to give her her wretched caravan

back." Perhaps the greatest of Zaranda Star's many impertinences was that she was running Star Protective Service as a profit-making venture, and it was returning handsome profit indeed, from what his spies reported.

The cleric shrugged. "Raise an army and crush her."

"That might not be easy."

"Good my lord! However they may style themselves, her followers are naught but peasants playing at soldiers. You're a proven war leader, and command *real* soldiers."

Hardisty went to his chair and sat. "War's an expensive game, Father. And here's the cursed thing about it: You can never know who will win."

He shrugged. "Zaranda Star's a seasoned commander, too, and we won't do well to underestimate her. Oh, it's not that I doubt we'd prevail against her and her rabble. But such a victory could prove costly. If we weaken ourselves too much in crushing her, we might find others stepping forward to challenge us—lthmong, to name one."

Armenides nodded. "Very well, my son." He smiled benignly. "Fortunate it is that we have . . . other assets."

"You mean *you* have other assets."

"Indeed."

"Then pray, make use of them. Oh, and when you go, could you send for the girl who was assisting me before, Duke Hembreon's daughter? With all due respect for your All-Friends, Father, I find most of them pretty dull fish, though helpful as can be. She, on the other hand, is quite vivacious."

"An air of gravity is concomitant with a certain stage in studying the mysteries of Ao All-Father," Armenides said. "Young Tatrina has not yet attained that stage; that's all."

"Well, thank goodness for that. Good afternoon, Father."

* * * * *

When Armenides arrived at his quarters on the palace's uppermost floor, the columnar doorposts—which were magic things, and alive, a fact quite unknown to the palace's builders—did not voice their shrill, tormented warning of intrusion. Reassured, the cleric entered.

The magically warded chambers were redolent with steamy, welcoming smells of cooking. They were simply and sparsely furnished. On a shelf sat the brazen head. Its eyes and mouth abruptly lit with yellow fire.

"Report! Report!" it demanded in a voice Zaranda Star would have recognized, though not as coming from it. It was a whisper, dry as wind over long-dead leaves.

"There's little enough to report," Armenides said. "I urged him to get tough with the council about recognizing him as lord of the city. He seems of a mind to. Beyond that, it's business as usual."

"Not enough! He is weak."

"He is weak in ways that serve us. Likewise is he mighty in rationalization."

"He must become king soon. Only then can the transformation take place."

"I assure you no one is more eager to see Baron Hardisty made king than Baron Hardisty."

"And the girl? What of the girl? Why do you not bring her to me?"

"Sweet Tatrina? She's more useful as she is, another golden cord binding him to me. He's quite infatuated with her."

"All the more reason to make sure of her."

"Come, now, we've been over this before. She can scarce beguile him if she starts acting like a zombie. And she's eager enough to do anything I ask, not that I've requested anything too controversial." He chuckled. "It's for the love of Ao, after all."

"You had best be right."

"I am. Now: attend. Trouble not the sleep of Zazesspur tonight. I have a message I need sent over some distance. It will take concentration, even for you."

"Do not command me! I command! Do not dare command me!"

"Forgive me, O mighty L'yafv-Afvonn, I beseech thee. I abase myself, I grovel, I truckle, I'm lower than dirt. Now will you please just do it?"

"What do you want?"

The cleric explained briefly. When he finished, the fire went out of the head's eyes and mouth. Both closed.

After a moment the bronze eyelids opened. "You can't imagine how vexing that is," the head said in its customary voice, "serving as mouthpiece for that thing in the cellar."

"I don't care to try," the priest said.

"Why don't you just listen to me? I can reveal unto you secrets—awful, indescribable secrets. All I ask—"

Armenides silenced it with a hand wave. "Little that is awful and indescribable," he said, "is secret from me."

So saying, he passed on into his innermost room. This was occupied by a fire pit, over which bubbled a great black iron caldron. From a hook set in the ceiling he took a large ladle and stirred the contents, infant limbs and organs aboil in spices.

It was time for lunch.

* * * * *

In the waters of the river Ith, the stars were tiny streaming pennons. "I dream about flying a lot," Chenowyn said as they walked along the red-brick river path.

The night air was charged with the scents of lilac and honeysuckle. The river, which sprang with considerable violence out of the Snowflake Mountains, had matured considerably by the time it reached Ithmong; it was broader about the middle, but had replaced frantic force with deliberate power. It chuckled to itself, complacent over what it had become, and slapped the stones that reinforced the banks.

Zaranda turned her face so the girl couldn't see her grimace. She, too, had dreamt last night, but not of flying. It was as if she heard that whisper again, the hated sibilance that had made her nights in Zazesspur so hideous.

She sought refuge in a different subject: "If you keep applying yourself as you've been—and also get lucky, since I don't know any such spells—you just might someday get to fly."

Chen shook her head. "Not like that, by magic. I feel as if I have wings. I spread them and drive myself into the sky like a bird. But I'm not a bird. I'm something different. But I'm still me, and it feels . . . right."

She noticed that she and Zaranda had fallen out of step, skipped to synchronize herself with the older woman. Zaranda frowned. Chen wasn't the only person she knew who was obsessive about staying in step with whomever she was strolling with. Her concern went beyond that.

From an urban feral child—ragged, gaunt, and filthy—Chenowyn had grown into a healthy, lovely young woman. She had put on an amazing growth spurt in the near-year since Zaranda first found her in that Zazesspurian alley, becoming more than a hand taller. Which should be small surprise, Zaranda reflected; Chen ate like a half-starved owlbear.

She now traded banter freely with Goldie, though the mare admitted privately to spotting the girl points in order to encourage her. Goldie had also taught her to ride. Otherwise, Chen was still pretty oblivious to those people who did not actively engage her interest: Stillhawk, Shield, the boys—and men—who increasingly sought to catch her dark maroon eye. However, if still not a diplomat, Chen had learned at least a modicum of manners, and while Zaranda herself had little use for altruism, she had guided the girl to a point where she was no longer self-absorbed to the point of being a menace to navigation.

Chen had also begun to take some trouble with herself. She kept herself scrupulously clean now without Zaranda having to remind her. And she seemed to have gotten past believing anything she could wrap or hang around her was suitable garb.

Tonight, for example, she was quite handsomely turned out, in white linen blouse with deerskin lacings up the front. Just like the one Zaranda wore. She had on form-fitting dark blue breeches and soft boots with fringed, downturned tops. Just like Zaranda's. Her heavy hair swept out behind her head like a dark red comet tail, confined by a silver fillet . . . just as Zaranda's straighter dark hair was.

Clearly, a problem existed.

Chen pointed heavenward, where the few lazy-drifting slate clouds weren't bothering to obscure many stars. "What's that group of stars there called? Like an hourglass, sort of, with three bright stars across the middle?"

"Kind of a lopsided hourglass—but as it happens, that's what they call it down here in the Empires of the Sands. In the north it's the Huntsman, to the Tuigan the Horse-Bowman."

Chen gave her a skeptical look. "That's about the tenth constellation you've told me the Tuigan have named after something to do with horses," she said in that very prim way she had when she thought she was being made fun of.

Zaranda laughed and hugged her. There was a time when such a suspicion would have brought on a concentration of uncontrolled dweomer to lift the hairs at Zaranda's nape. Sometimes she dared hope she might actually civilize the girl.

"Honey," she said, "to the Tuigan, *everything* has to do with horses. Most of their constellations are named for them, and those that aren't have names from the hunt or war: the Hare, the Falcon, the Yataghan. But mostly, it's horses, horses, horses. Did you know that one major tribal group has an epic poem a quarter of a million lines long about a hero whose horse is smarter than he is?"

Chen's underlip jutted, most fetchingly. Zaranda felt the faint tingle of power in the air around them. "Now you're teasing me!"

"No. Really I'm not. The Tuigan have some strange and wild ways—wonderful ways, I can see now that they're out of our hair. They're very different from us."

"Oh." Interest fell like a veil from the girl's face. When talk turned to *people*,

she quickly grew bored. Instead she pointed again to the sky. "How about that star away up there, that big red one?"

Zaranda smiled. Was the girl genuinely interested, or merely trying to emulate her in yet another way?

But the air was warm and sweet, the stars seductive in their brilliance. Chen could not be called a sweet child, yet she did lack malice. Her mind was quick and keen, and now that the soot had been rubbed away from the outside of her, her spirit shone clear and bright as any star. In her way she adored Zaranda, and Zaranda, in her way, loved her.

So they walked and talked beside the wide, complacent river, and left unpleasant necessities to the province of a different day.

* * * * *

Through lengthening shadows Zaranda walked back to the Ith-Side Inn with long-legged strides. Nothing had been decided in the day's negotiations with the town council—but, of course, nothing was intended to be. That was the way of negotiations, that they dragged on, and while that fact was little to Zaranda's taste, it was nonetheless a fact, and she could as readily draw the moon down from the sky as alter it. Striding the brick walkway that ran alongside the river and was flanked by weeping willows, she was not displeased with the talk's progress, such as it was.

The Ithmong council would come around to her way of thinking, she was confident. Right now they had trouble seeing past the short-term pain of losing the income tolls brought. However, they and all Ithmong stood to gain from increasing trade—had already profited from the new commerce Star Protective Services had helped set flowing. Cutting Ernest Gallowglass's tolls for the Ithal Bridge and river passage would serve the economy of Tethyr like a healing spell cast on a wounded warrior.

Of course, the town council would not be unique in the history of Faerun if they attempted to have it all—tariffs *and* expanded trade—through a little well-timed treachery. Zaranda seemed to invite such a ploy by leaving most of her retinue, including senior partners, camped outside the city.

She was not quite so ingenuous. The two hundred Star Protective employees without the walls were recruited from the very best trainees who had passed through the program—smart, brave, and idealistic, devoted to Zaranda Star and to Shield of Innocence, who served as captain in Zaranda's absence. While they were too few to storm the walls if the council got up to mischief, they were more than capable of rousing the countryside—where Gallowglass's legacy ran to abiding distrust for all who dwelt behind Ithmong's high stone walls—and shutting off trade. After all, grain and livestock didn't *have* to be gathered inside the city before being shipped to the rest of Tethyr.

Zaranda began to whistle. She thought the town council got the point.

Life wore a far more cheerful face than when she had fled Zazesspur. Star Protective Services had extended operations across much of Tethyr. Zaranda drew sufficient salary to meet payments on her county in the east. She was herself an employee now, having quit as leader in a dispute last fall over what direction the company should take. To get her back, the others had been compelled to offer a contract making explicit her powers and duties as chief executive.

The possibility had existed that they would not so offer. But she had found attempting to be everything to everybody increasingly intolerable. Had they

made no effort to win her back, she would have mounted Goldie—with Chenowyn behind her, if the girl still cared to be her apprentice—and ridden away. She loved Morninggold, but if she had to, she could put it behind her and start again anew. She had done as much before.

Of her comrades, Stillhawk remained mistrustful of Shield, though he was with him now, outside the urban confinement he so hated. After Zaranda walked and was hired back, Balmeric had quit, declaring the enterprise far too strange for him. He let Zaranda buy him out and rode to Myratma, and there, he said, he would take ship for Waterdeep, where a man could still find straightforward sword-swinging employment.

Chenowyn remained with Zaranda, of course. And Farlorn . . . Farlorn was where he happened to be at any given moment. He was like a cat, the beautiful half-elf bard. What she expected of him, even what she wanted of him, Zaranda could not have said.

The inn's courtyard was surrounded by an eight-foot wall topped with broken glass. Attack from the river was reckoned no major threat; Ithmong had always had a respectably sized and reasonably professional town guard, which Gallowglass's administration had only strengthened, and its riverine patrol kept careful watch for would-be marauders as a byproduct of enforcing the tolls. Thieves, however, were as intrinsic to urban Tethyrian life as houseflies, and found the river a convenient avenue, patrols notwithstanding.

Approaching the courtyard gate, Zaranda heard a familiar female voice crying, "Hah! Hah!" and the ring of steel on steel.

Frowning, she grabbed Crackle tongue's scabbard to keep it from fouling her leg and broke into a run. Zazesspur's city council had issued several decrees officially deploring the activities of Star Protective Services, but had never quite mustered the presumption to try to outlaw it. Though the civic guard grew apace—with the aim, some said, of reuniting Tethyr by force—the council was currently preoccupied by a complicated gavotte preparatory to naming Baron Hardisty lord of the city. An attempt to arrest Zaranda and her lieutenants—or, less formally, assassinate them—was not outside possibility's realm, however.

She rounded the corner and stopped. Two figures faced each other, one slender and feminine, one scarcely less slim but taller and broader through the shoulders. Each wore quilted, heavily padded jerkins, leather gloves, and masks of wire mesh, and fought each other with capped rapiers. Stablehands lounged on the sidelines, uttering calls of encouragement.

As Zaranda appeared in the gateway, the fencers stopped and swept the masks from their heads. The master was Farlorn, his pupil, Chenowyn.

The girl's cheeks were flushed beneath her freckles. "Oh, Zaranda, it's so marvelous! He's teaching me—"

She saw Zaranda's expression. Her words faltered to a stop. "What do you think you're doing?" Zaranda asked quietly.

Chenowyn gazed down at her feet, which were kicking at a clump of matted straw. "Learning to fence."

Zaranda walked to her, touched her arm, guided her aside. The stablehands abruptly found business that wanted tending to. Farlorn stood with rapier tip grounded and protective mask under one arm, a faint supercilious smile on his face.

"Don't you understand," Zaranda asked in a quiet but pressing voice, "that

you haven't *time* for that? If you want to be a mage, you've got to work at it full-time."

A full underlip trembled, then, "*You* didn't have to! You're a mage and a warrior, both! I just want to be like *you*."

"Chen, dear, you don't understand. I *did* have to devote myself to studying magic, body and soul. It didn't come easy for me—it doesn't come easy to anyone who really wants to be good at it. I didn't become a warrior until I had studied magic for many years—and only after I'd put that study aside for good and all."

Chenowyn sniffled, dabbed at an eye with her thumb, and looked away. "But that's not the real problem," Zaranda said. "The real problem is ... you've got to stop trying to be *me*. Because you can't be me, you cannot be more than an imitation me, and a poor one at that—however hard you try. Whereas the Chen I know is strong and vibrant and alive, an altogether admirable girl—and you do a marvelous job of being her."

She touched Chen's cheek. The girl pulled away.

"You're just jealous because Farlorn is spending so much time with me!" she cried through tears. She ran off toward the stables.

Zaranda sighed and shook her head. And how much truth is there in that? she wondered.

A commotion came from inside the stalls. Chen burst forth, clinging like a monkey to the back of a handsome chestnut gelding. She rode right out of the yard and away up the brick street, grooms shouting angrily after her.

"I'll bring her back," Farlorn called. He loped gracefully into the stable, plucking the cap from his rapier and sheathing it. Zaranda teetered on the edge of following him.

The bard emerged on his dappled gray mare. He waved jauntily to Zaranda and rode in pursuit of her errant apprentice.

No, Zaranda thought. It won't help if I go. Instead she went inside the stable on feet that had turned to lead, to greet Goldie before taking herself to her chamber.

* * * * *

As Zaranda arrived, the serving maid was leaving, having just lit the lanterns. Zaranda smiled mechanically at her, went into her chamber, pulled off her boots, and sat down at a table by the window.

The shutters were open, admitting evening smells of water and spring flowers and pavement slowly giving up the day's heat. The lights were coming on all over Ithmong, and out on the river lanterns bobbed from barge prows like the lures of giant anglerfish.

The town council had sent wine, sprays of flowers, and baskets of preserved fruit—cheap enough gestures of goodwill. And indeed Zaranda appreciated them, though she wasn't about to roll over on their account. She took up a wedge of orange preserved in ginger, bit into it, and noticed something new: a purple glass flask with stout body and long, slim neck.

Zaranda picked it up and turned it over in her hands, impressed. This was no local product like the rather insipid wine—Ithmong produced several serviceable beers, but their vineyards couldn't hold a candle to Zazesspur's. This was Tintoram's Select, a blackberry brandy made by the halflings of the Purple Hills of the coast between Zazesspur and Myratma, famed throughout Faerun for its flavor and potency. A notable gift, even for a town councilor who

had been fattening on tolls the last few years.

She broke the lead seal and uncorked the flask. The aroma that flowed out was sweet and heady as first love and nourishing as a meal. She poured some—just a splash—into a tumbler. It was a purple so dark it was almost black. She passed it beneath her nose, allowing its richness to permeate her being, and sipped. It burned, and soothed, and burst like a bomb within her.

She let herself savor the sensations for a moment. Then she reached for her inkpot, her pen made from a sahuagin spine with steel nib from Kara-Tur, and a clean sheet of papyrus. It was time to begin drafting a contract proposal.

She wrote a little. Then, feeling the weariness of the day's events clamp a heavy hand on the back of her neck, she picked up the tumbler, sipped again, rolled the brandy around in her mouth.

I wonder where Chen and Farlorn are, she thought, feeling concern stir. Yet she could muster no great urgency. Nor could she readily drag her attention back to the lines on the papyrus sheet.

Instead her attention wandered out the window. Away in the distance, over the river perhaps, a single amber light burned. It seemed both poignantly lonely and jewel-beautiful, and Zaranda found herself staring at it. As she stared, her vision wandered further and further out of focus, and the amber light grew steadily larger and fuzzier, until it became huge, became a sun, and swallowed her altogether.

With a several-voiced whistle and a resounding smack, the knotted rawhide thongs bit into Zaranda's bare flesh. Clenched teeth barred a scream, but a groan escaped her throat. Her body twisted clockwise from the force of the blow, then turned widdershins, toes dangling two inches from a drain set in the slimy stone floor. Her whole weight depended from her arms, chained to a hook in the low, round-vaulted ceiling. Manacles bit her wrists like the pincers of a giant scorpion; her shoulders burned from unnatural strain.

When she could trust herself to speak more or less steadily, she moistened her lips and said, "I hate to disappoint you, but I don't really have any vital secrets to withhold from you. So there's not . . . much point... to this exercise."

Shaveli Sword-Master laughed hoarsely. He swung his cat-o'-nine-tails so its thongs sang savagely. Zaranda shut her eyes and clamped her jaw, then winced as the lash struck stone flagging with a crack.

"Clearly you don't understand, Countess," he said cheerfully. The glare from a brazier, in which various iron implements nestled yellow-glowing heads among the coals, cast entirely redundant, fiendish highlights over his face. The dungeon stank of mold and hot metal and all the scents of fear. "You know nothing that could possibly be of the slightest use to my master—only how to inconvenience him, which I fancy you'll not be doing any more. As to—"

Not looking at him, Zaranda had begun to move her lips soundlessly. Shaveli's rat face twisted in rage, and he lashed her so cruelly that she could not help crying out.

He laid the whip's handle to her cheek and forced her face toward his. "Casting spells, were we, witch?"

"I was merely . . . sending a prayer to Lliira," Zaranda said. "I don't feel as if my life has enough . . . joy ... in it right now."

The Sword-Master put his head back and laughed. Then he struck again. "Very clever. Very clever, indeed. I can tell we're going to have a most diverting relationship."

He tapped the handle against her cheek. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth where she had bitten her lip. "You should know, though, that none of your magic will help you now. Into the very mortar of these dungeon walls was worked powdered fragments of the bones of the gods who exploded in the magic-dead realm of far Tantras. No dweomer can penetrate here, so chant away at your futile spells—it pleases me to punish you for doing so."

That would account for the dull but constant throb between Zaranda's temples; she had heard of such an effect from others who had passed through the rare dead-magic reaches of Toril. Magic was woven into the very fabric of the world, in all the creatures who walked upon it, swam its seas, flew above it or delved the Underdark below. To be cut off from sorcery, from dweomer, was an unnatural condition. Those steeped in the arts magical were so sensitive to such isolation that it caused them pain.

And here I thought it was that cursed brandy, she thought.

"No, it's not information I seek," he said, pushing her to set her rotating in her chains, sending pain flashes down from torn wrists to tortured shoulders. "It's merely that whiling away the hours with you is the reward my stalwart

service has won me from my just and generous master."

"It's true what they say in the markets, then," Zaranda said. "That the only pleasure Shaveli can take from a woman is what he can get with whips and chains."

Still spinning, she caught a glimpse of his features, a fiendish mask of fury. Her world became pain and screams.

* * * * *

The stone cell floor was cold and slimy beneath her as she lay in uttermost dark. At least it had the effect of soothing her welts. Best not mention that, or they'll come scatter salt.

She could see nothing. On first waking in the dungeon, she had felt her way all around her cell. It had not been a lengthy process. The room appeared to be about ten feet in every dimension; by holding arms outstretched above her head and leaping as high as she could, she could just brush the ceiling with her fingertips. There was a heavy, metal-shod wooden door, a good hand thick to judge by the sound when she rapped it with her knuckles, with an armored judas gate set into it, currently shut. A drain was sunk in the center of the chamber, about half again as big as her palm and covered with a metal grate.

Though the traditional dungeon dampness had engendered a coating of slime on the stones, they were well cut and fitted, so that she could barely feel the seams when she ran hands across them. Their smoothness was the smoothness of careful dressing by stonemasons with a Tethyrian concern for craft, not of generations of prisoners' hands running over them in the vain hope that a portal to freedom would suddenly open up. Moreover the place smelled, well, *clean*. For a dungeon.

So she was captive in Zazesspur's new Palace of Governance.

She tasted agony raw. Shaveli had a fine hand with a whip; she had to grant him that. Though her body felt as if it were wrapped in nets of live fire, as far as she could ascertain, he had not broken the skin once.

Which had certain implications, not necessarily soothing. It was just possible that Hardisty was dim enough to imagine she might be broken to his will through physical abuse. The problem was, he had known her as a war leader with no scruples about using ruses to win the day. He must know he could trust no compact she gave under duress.

And if he didn't realize it, surely Armenides would. There was more to the self-proclaimed archpriest of Ao than his apple-cheeked smile and halo of hair suggested. During their interview a year ago, he stayed in the background uttering homilies, but all the same Zaranda could practically see the strings running from his hands to Hardisty.

She took it as an ominous sign that, as far as she knew, the baron had not paid her a visit. That implied a reluctance to look an old comrade-in-arms in the eye.

So the odds were good that she was being kept relatively intact for public execution—with first, perhaps, a public show trial.

She shifted, rolled over, cradled her cheek on her other hand. A bale of hay had thoughtfully been tossed in the cell with her to serve as a bed—it wouldn't do to have her body a mass of sores when she mounted the gibbet. The prickly straw was small use at present. She would have been uncomfortable on the finest feather bed in Waterdeep, but she could at least redistribute

aches.

She remembered . . . what? The taste of Tintoram's Select—was there an odd dissonance, like the forty-fifth cherub from the left in the eighteenth row striking a sour note in the midst of an angelic chorus? She wasn't familiar enough with exotic liqueurs to tell. It had to be the brandy, though—she *would* have tasted something amiss in the candied orange.

After that, remembered impressions: the thump, as of an ancient tome slipping from its shelf far off in a vast, dusty, drafty castle, which was her face striking the tabletop. The door opening, a voice distorted to unrecognizability saying, gruffly, "*Take her.*" Men dressed as artisans, plain everyday Tethyrian tradesmen whom none would suspect, rolling her up in a rug and bundling her onto their shoulders. They would have left openly but discreetly by a back exit—it was far from unusual for Faerun hostelrys to desire to have a carpet cleaned or replaced at odd hours of the night, and with as little fanfare as possible.

And after that—jostling, horse smell, harness jingle. Then nothing until she woke here in the dark, with only furtive, fugitive scurrying sounds and the dripping of water to remind her she yet lived.

She rolled onto her back—*no*, that was a mistake—onto her belly, laid cheek against chill stone. Who betrayed me? The thought was like mice gnawing her belly from the inside.

The Ithmong town council—*no*. Ithmong was known for being unsubtle by Tethyrian standards, but she found it hard to believe *any* Tethyrian could be quite that blatant. And to what end? Ithmong didn't distrust Zazesspur as sorely as it did Myratma, but would never happily see its rival rule all Tethyr. That was a major reason the town council was treating with Zaranda in the first place: Star Protectives offered a means of slowing or reversing the death by strangulation that was overtaking Tethyr without bending the knee to Zazesspur and the man who would be its lord.

As it was, suspicion would fall at once on Ithmong. Zaranda's young cadre were bright, but villagers and countryfolk, not necessarily sophisticated. They might leap to the obvious conclusion and blame the town council. Farlorn would know better; Stillhawk had no more taste for intrigue than he had for wearing makeup, but he had been about in the world enough to realize how unlikely Ithmong was to be culpable. But would the man—the creature—who was her second-in-command?

Shield. The name tolled like a cracked bell in her brain. Someone had betrayed her when she was smuggling her caravan into Zazesspur. Someone had betrayed her inside Zazesspur. And someone had betrayed her in Ithmong.

Of course, what she had been betrayed for in Zazesspur was harboring the great orc. But what did that tell her, really? The searchers had missed him, after all. Maybe his presence had been used as pretext for searching Zaranda's quarters precisely because it would divert suspicion from him. Such a convoluted plan would almost certainly be beyond his means—but it was a typically Tethyrian, and Zazesspurian, bit of nastiness. And Shield was ever-so-good at carrying out plans that others drew up.

He had plenty of other opportunities to harm you, she tried to tell herself. But it was meager solace: so did anyone else who would have been in position to betray her on those occasions. That meant only the orog, Farlorn,

and Stillhawk. Chen had come into the game too late, Balmeric had left too early, and the several mercenaries who had accompanied her both into and out of Zazesspur were scattered across Tethyr teaching plow-boys and shepherd girls how to fight.

But why? Well, on other worlds evil was a choice, but here on Toril it was also a *thing*. Perhaps, as Farlorn and Stillhawk averred, it left an indelible mark on those who had been born to it.

And how? How could a servitor of evil pass himself as a paladin?

"Too easily, perhaps," she answered herself in a bitter whisper. Who had ever heard of an orcish paladin? For that matter, who'd ever heard of a nonhuman paladin? Not Zaranda, nor anyone she'd ever spoken to about it. Perhaps Nyadnar had, but the sorceress would never have deigned to answer such a question, unless it served her highly idiosyncratic conception of the balance of forces necessary to sustain the universe—or her whim, which Zaranda suspected she found hard to tell from each other.

Still, still. . . Shield, can it be? She could not know for sure. All she truly knew was that someone she had accepted into her confidence had turned on her.

Which meant, ultimately, that the one who had betrayed her was herself.

She could no longer help herself. The weeping started as a bubbling forth from eyes and mouth, like water through the hull of a boat holed by a reef. Then it truly tore loose, gushing now, a torrent. Her body convulsed to strident macaw cries of grief and anger and fear and pain and humiliation, interspersed with hoarse, panting breaths as of one who has run until her heart is about to burst.

Finally, exhausted, she fell into a state that, by comparison to her previous condition, was sleep.

* * * * *

A scratching sound brought her instantly awake. Her fingers clutched for Crackle tongue. Then she felt again the whip marks that clothed her, felt hard stone, smelled moist stone and foulness.

Again it came, the scrape of tiny claws on rock, hard nearby. Zaranda's muscles tensed. There were any number of candidates for making such a sound, and under the circumstances it seemed unlikely to be anything pleasant.

Scratch, scratch. A slight hint of echo. Her visitor was in the drain, then. Well, that made it less likely it would be crawling over her face as soon as she fell back to sleep.

More scratching, of subtly different timbre, as if the unseen creature were testing the grate. Zaranda found herself oddly torn by hoping it would not somehow find a way through and at the same time hoping it would. Am I really so afraid of isolation, she wondered, that I'd prefer loathsome company to no company at all?

Silence now. She had an irrational sense that her hidden guest was waiting.

"What are you?" she whispered. Then she laughed; the stones from the dead-magic land would prevent eavesdropping by mystic means. She had encountered certain arrangements of tubes and funnels—miracles of design, not dweomer-craft—that enabled someone in one part of a building to listen in on what transpired in a room in an entirely different part. It was possible

Hardisty had such a system built into his palace. And what of it? She was talking to a rat or an insect or a doubtless loathly whatever; let whoever wanted to listen in. Much good might it do them.

"What are you?" she asked again aloud. No response, which was no surprise; only that curious sense of *expectation*.

"I guess it doesn't matter, does it? You can't answer me, and it isn't very likely you understand. I'm merely talking to you because I'll go mad if I don't hear something besides my own breathing and the sound of water dripping; and if I talk to myself too much I'll fear I've gone mad anyway."

She had dragged herself over the floor until she lay with her cheek on the floor beside the grate. "You're a patient one, aren't you? What do you wait for?"

More silence, measured in many painful breaths. "Well, whatever you want, I guess I've not provided it yet. Please forgive my failings as hostess, but I wasn't expecting to do much entertaining. I'm sure the place looks a fright."

She turned her face toward the ceiling. The blackness hung above her with all the weight of the tons of stone overhead. "You know," she said, "I've often heard that there is one who converses even with the rats and the roaches of Zazesspur. Certainly I've seen her in the company of beings stranger than that. If that's true, tell her Zaranda Star is here."

She rolled onto her belly, put her mouth close to the grate, and spoke in a fierce whisper. "She had some plan for me. I can't carry it out if I rot down here, or if Baron Hardisty decides to have me discreetly strangled and dumped in the harbor. If you can hear me, bear word of me to Nyadnar."

Nyadnar. Nyadnar. The name echoed down the sewer pipe. Through it Zaranda heard the *skitter-scratch* of tiny claws, dwindling. *Nyadnar.*

I am going mad, she decided. Doubtless, it's for the best.

* * * * *

The clatter of massive bolts roused her. This wasn't the latch on the food slot at the bottom of the door, through which bowls of water and gruel were thrust at what she was certain were calculatedly random intervals; the door itself was being opened. She gathered herself into a crouch. It wasn't that she expected to be able to break past her jailers or overpower them. It was that, if they came to bear her to more torture, she would not suffer them to find her supine.

The door opened. The light from a single hand-held torch flooded through like noonday. Zaranda cringed and shielded her eyes like a vampire caught abroad by the rising sun.

In the torchlight stood silhouetted a tall figure in a robe and a square hat. "Zaranda Star?" it said. "Countess Morninggold?"

It was the voice of Duke Hembreon.

"You have held this captive in secret from the city council," Duke Hembreon said. "This is illegal. You will surrender her to me forthwith, in the council's name."

Zaranda had clad herself in a white smock that one of the duke's escorts had thrown at her. It was already much worse for wear, and she hadn't taken a dozen steps in it. It took all her willpower to keep from simply letting herself hang in the grip of the two Zazesspurian city policemen who stood flanking her. She forced herself to stand upright, albeit swaying like a sapling in a squall, and listened to the white-haired duke and Shaveli debate her fate.

The Sword-Master tipped back his head and brayed laughter through his nose.

"It's time to decide, old man," he said in a challenging voice, hand on rapier hilt. The two blue-and-bronzes behind him wore unhappy looks beneath their morions.

"Decide what?" the duke demanded, visibly bristling at the other's impertinence. His escorts, in the black-enameled boiled-leather helmets and cuirasses of the constabulary, glared at the civic guardsmen with frank hostility. The police had no love for these Johnny-come-lately paramilitaries.

"Whether you're *serious* about the getting and keeping of power. Here's an enemy to the state, an obstacle to your plans as well as ours. We had the situation under control. Why interfere?"

"The rule of law is paramount, and must be maintained."

"Law?" The swordsman flicked dismissive fingers. "What is law? A means to an end. Law's a fine tool; power's better. But to use the power, one must have the will."

"Power without law is corrupt, and soon turns to evil," the duke said acerbically. "Sooner, rather than later, for the application of will."

"Words," Shaveli said. He gestured around the torch-lit corridor. "Around you is stone." He slapped his rapier hilt. "And steel. Here are facts. Pit your words against them: which prevails?"

"The will of the council that your master has petitioned to make him master first of Zazesspur, and then of all Tethyr, will prevail," the duke said. "For that is the law."

Shaveli laughed again. "So now the law is to be your will?"

"It is given to the council to make the laws. Do you defy us? I think your lord will little thank you for your contumacy."

The Sword-Master swept off his plumed hat and bowed low. "No contumacy, Your Grace; take your prisoner, and greatly may you enjoy the use of her." The duke stiffened. "I crave only that you answer me a question philosophical: each day a dozen factions strive to pull you, your council, and my lord baron down. Will your laws suffice to stay them?"

"They must," Duke Hembreon said stiffly, and nodded for his men to go.

* * * * *

The morning sunlight stung Zaranda's cheeks like salt sea spray on an open cut, and made her eyes water. It was glorious all the same. She drank deeply of the breeze that molded the smock to her rangy form, and savored every nuance of it, the rotting fish and garbage and soot no less than the ocean smell and the spring-green grass without the walls. She even relished

the freedom of a walk across the plaza, illusion though it was.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, voice hoarse from screaming.

"To city hall," the duke said. "You shall be decently housed and treated, though a prisoner you must remain."

Passersby stopped to stare at the spectacle of a striking woman being led across the square in manacles, then hurried on their way. Zazesspurians were acquiring the reflexes needed to survive under tyranny, it appeared.

"And why must I remain a captive?" she asked. "What laws have I broken?"

The duke's blue eyes looked elsewhere than at her. "It is not for me to say. A bill of particulars shall be read to you when you face the judgment of the council."

"So that's the way of it." Zaranda laughed. "And how did you come to learn I was Faneuil's secret captive?"

"Information was confidentially lodged with the council to this effect."

"Ah, so much goes on in Zazesspur these days that won't stand the light of day."

She shook her head. Her long dark hair, unbound, whipped in the wind like a cavalry pennon. "My erstwhile host the Sword-Master questioned your commitment to power. I have to wonder about your devotion to this rule of law you speak so much about. And I've a philosophical question of my own: if you lack the force of will to use and indeed abuse power, and at the same time, lack the will to adhere unswervingly to the law you pay lip service to—what then?"

But the duke had no more words to say to her, and so she passed into the ornate, archaic city hall, and back once again into servitude.

* * * * *

The great council hall of Zazesspur was a vast cathedral space, with a black and white parquet floor, a pointed vault high overhead, and windows running clerestory beneath it down either side of the chamber. Beneath the windows, even above the two large doors of beaten bronze that gave onto the hall, ran rows of benches to seat such onlookers as the council saw fit to admit. Today they were thronged. Zaranda's appearance before the city council—not her trial, as the crier made abundantly, indeed redundantly clear—was the social event of the season.

The council members had all brought cliques selected from among their retinues, which made for interesting and clashing blocks of color in the stands. Lords Faunce and Inselm Hhune, former councilors, were on hand, as were the syndics who ruled the guilds of Zazesspur, sweltering in fur-trimmed robes. Earl Ravenak and a noisy, aromatic contingent of Hairheads occupied a sort of island near the exit, none of their fellow spectators caring to get too close to them. On the other end of the hall and social scale, Armenides the Compassionate sat beaming benignly, surrounded by the white-robed scions of Zazesspur's most pretentious families. Finally, a number of common citizens had been let in to watch the awful majesty of the nascent state vindicate itself. Evidently awed by the grandeur of occasion and surroundings, they were subdued by Zazesspurian standards, their jostling and chatter a low commotion, like a stiff breeze in the green-budding branches outside.

A long table occupied a low dais that ran from wall to wall at the head of the hall. Behind it sat the twelve members of the council: Deymos, Hafzul Gorbon, and Marquis Enzo; Anakul, serenely smiling in his robes of black and red and

his black silken cowl fitted close to his round head and drawn to a peak between his brows; Malhalvodon Stringfellow, a-fidget in his chair like a barely continent child; Strombolio, in red and yellow; Jinjivar the Sorcerer—tall, gaunt, and splendid in a pale-blue and purple turban so extravagantly round as to make him resemble an attenuated mushroom; Torvid, Naumos, and Lady Korun; Baron Zam, looking sour; Duke Hembreon, looking even graver than usual, possibly preoccupied by the fact that his daughter Tatrina was nowhere to be seen in the placidly smiling All-Friends contingent. Their seating was controlled by a rigid and deliberately arcane rotation schedule.

At the table's right end stood Baron Faneuil Hardisty. He was simply dressed in green, gold, and brown; his closest approach to ostentation was the silver chaplet he wore around prematurely graying temples, significant of his recent acclamation as lord of the city. Like the late kings of Tethyr, he had no right to sit at the council table, and his very presence was of questionable legality. It seemed to symbolize the radical-traditionalist thrust of his program: *things will be as they once were, only different.*

At the table's left end the crier stood forward. He wore a tabard sporting the traditional device of lion, gules, rampant on field of gold. No one knew why this was traditional, inasmuch as Zazesspur's emblem was a blue cockatrice on a light-green field. No one knew where *that* came from, either, cockatrices being exceedingly rare in Tethyr, even since the monarchy's collapse. Some savants theorized that was the reason for the symbol's adoption, that the appearance of such a rarity as a cockatrice in Zazesspur might have been deemed worthy of commemoration. Actually, nobody cared anymore.

"Oyez, oyez! " the crier cried. "Gentles of Zazesspur, attend! The city council is now in session: let all observe the gravest punctilio!"

The groundlings cranked their hubbub down a notch. Despite the crier's most ferocious glare they refused to subside further. After an exasperated moment, he puffed himself up and blared, "The prisoner, Zaranda Star, may approach the council."

Zaranda marched in, flanked by a squad of city police in shiny black carapaces. She wore a fresh white gown. Her hands were manacled before her by discreet steel.

The crowd stirred. The Hairheads jeered and shook their fists. The policemen escorted her to the council table and withdrew to the sidelines.

The crier struck the floor three times with the head-high ceremonial mace he carried. "Spectators must remain silent, or be thrust forth!"

The Marquise Enzo leaned forward. He had a balding head, fuzzy eyebrows, and spectacles perched before perpetually blinking eyes. He occupied the table's middle seat, and was consequently chairman for the day.

"Zaranda Star," he said, steepling fingers before his small chin, "you have much to answer for."

"Of what do I stand accused?" she asked. Her voice, though calm, filled the hall.

"Nothing, nothing. Did you not hear? You're not on trial."

"Then what am I doing here?"

"Answering questions, only."

She held up fettered hands.

"Your status remains in doubt," Baron Zam said waspishly. "Your creation of your own private army is notorious."

"And keeping me in irons will prevent me from threatening you with this supposed army?" she asked. Some of the audience laughed.

Jinjivar the Sorcerer leaned forward. His turban wobbled alarmingly, threatening to overbalance him. "Is it true," he asked, "that upon being taken into the custody of Duke Hembreon, you gave your parole to employ no magic in any attempt to escape or otherwise alter the circumstances of your captivity?"

"I did."

"And do you now reaffirm the oaths you swore to that effect?"

"I do. I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"So now," the marquis said, eyebrows drawn together in annoyance at the others' horning in, "account for yourself."

She shook back her hair and laughed. The hall fell silent. "That's rather a broad assignment. Would you care to be more specific?"

Burly, black-bearded Hafzul Gorbon slammed a palm on the tabletop. "Impertinence!" He glared around at his fellows. "What more do we have to hear? Let's have her head off and go back to our affairs."

Ravenak's contingent cheered. "I see why I'm not on trial," Zaranda said. "I appear already to have been found guilty and sentenced to death, besides."

Hembreon leaned forward. "Zaranda Star, no decision has been made by this council regarding you. I give you my word."

"Very well," she said. "You want an account of what I've been doing. You shall have it. Many say that Tethyr needs a strong central government. That may be so; certainly the land has fallen on hard times since the monarchy fell.

"Few will deny that the justification for a government's existence is to protect the persons and property of its citizens. Yet when I returned to Tethyr a year ago I found no shortage of governments. Rather I found them everywhere. But I found precious little *protection*. Rather, as often as not, the self-proclaimed governments were the most rapacious predators."

Malhalvadon Stringfellow jumped up onto his chair. "Must we sit and listen to these slanders?"

"You're welcome to stand," said Anakul in his unctuous voice. "But, pray, be quiet. It is the deponent's time to speak. You'll only protract matters needlessly if you continue to disrupt these proceedings."

Grumbling, the halfling sat back down and Zaranda continued. "My caravan was illegally impounded when I attempted to bring it into Zazesspur. I was left nearly destitute. Under such circumstances, if one doesn't wish to become a beggar or go into crime or government, one must find a service that people need and supply it."

She turned to the colorful multitudes ranked around the huge hall.

"I must insist that the defen—that is, the *deponent*—face the council—"

Enzo said.

Zaranda ignored him. "The people of Tethyr had neither safety nor security. Rivers and roads were blockaded as effectively as by an invading army. I could not set matters right myself; I had no army sufficient to such a task, nor means of raising one. Nor am I sure that way is best, for had I the force to impose order, would I not also possess the means of imposing in other ways, as the robbers who call themselves nobles do?"

"What is all this?" Baron Zam demanded. "What of your sedition? What of your raising the countryside in rebellion?"

"Sedition against whom?" Zaranda asked. "Rebellion against whom? Not the 'duly constituted government' of Tethyr—because it neglects to exist.

"All I have done is attempt to provide the people with the means of defending themselves. That's the only way I know to achieve real security. Seldom in my life have I known safety that I did not provide myself. Who, after all, will care for you better than you yourselves?"

She turned back to face the council and raised bound hands. "The people of Tethyr have responded. Many of them, it seemed, desired what I and my associates had to offer. There is no 'private army.' There is only a small cadre, my friends and employees, far too minute to threaten a mighty walled city such as Zazesspur. And there are common folk in the farms and villages and out upon the roads, well trained, armed, and organized to protect themselves, but lacking the means to sustain an aggressive campaign.

"And there you have it, Lady Korun, gentlemen. The entirety of my plan, and of my intentions: to help the people of Tethyr free themselves from fear."

Shouts and applause burst from the crowd. Hisses and angry shouts answered from council claques and Hairheads. The crier pounded the butt of his mace on the floor and screamed for order until his face went red. Baron Hardisty stepped forward, clapping his hands. The din subsided, until the only sound to be heard in all the hall was the soft fall of his slippered feet and his solitary applause.

"Very impressive, Countess Morninggold. Your passion is quite commendable. And also sad—inasmuch as it demonstrates that you have become a tool of the forces of anarchy that have so blighted our land. You speak of the impossibility of treason against the nonexistent government of Tethyr, and certainly this is true. But in spreading arms and broadcasting *resistance* among the populace, you seriously impede the establishment of such just and necessary government, and so, in a real sense, betray the people of Tethyr, whom you claim to help."

"Order and government are not one and the same," Zaranda said.

"You will address the lord of the city as 'my lord,'" Enzo instructed.

Hardisty waved a hand, dispensing of formality. "The Countess Morninggold has told of the patchwork of governments, self-proclaimed nobles, she encountered on her return to Tethyr. Does this not eloquently bespeak the need for the reunification of the country, under a central government strong enough to suppress such petty tyrannies?"

That provoked dark looks and mutters from the council table, since those self-proclaimed nobles had been comfortable sources of income for no few of the people who sat at it.

"I don't doubt a central government could suppress petty tyrannies," Zaranda replied. "But would that necessarily be an improvement? With all respect, isn't it as likely to produce one *big* tyranny?"

"Zaranda, Zaranda." Hardisty shook his head sadly. "Such cynicism ill becomes you. I wonder if your soul is altogether free of the taint of evil."

"In my life, I have done much that I regret," Zaranda said, "but little I'm ashamed of. Can everyone present claim as much?"

"Insolence!" hissed Baron Zam. "Intolerable."

"Let's put an end to this farce," demanded Hafzul Gorbon, his nostrils flaring like an angry bull's.

"I'm inclined to agree," said Lady Korun, sprawled at apparent ease in her

chair. "Clearly the woman's a subversive. Do we really need to hear more of her babbling?"

"Ladies and gentlemen of the council, of Zazesspur—of all of Tethyr," Hardisty said, turning to address the onlookers, "hear me. Our land has come to a fork in its road. Before you lie two paths: my way, which leads through monarchy to order; hers, which leads to anarchy and ultimately dissolution. The time has come to choose. I trust in you—in all of you—to choose wisely. I believe you will turn away from the false promises of 'freedom' that the countess and her ilk hold out, and give yourselves into the care of those who have your interests at heart, and know how best to serve those interests."

"Those who trade freedom for security in the end get neither," Zaranda said ringingly. "Who honors promises made to slaves?"

Armenides rose from the midst of his white-robed acolytes. "Sir Chairman, if I might address the council?"

The Marquis Enzo glanced at Hardisty. "Very well, Your Eminence."

"The countess speaks with the voice of the past. We speak with the voice of the future. What need have the people of Tethyr for arms or the skill of arms? Such can only increase the burden on their souls. I beg of you, good sirs and ladies, disarm these poor people she has deluded before they do harm to others or themselves."

"Listen to what he's saying!" Zaranda challenged the crowd. "What does this government intend for Tethyr that it need fear a people enabled to defend themselves?"

Enzo pounded the table and shouted for order. The crier grew almost apoplectic. City policemen seized Zaranda by the arms and hustled her from the hall.

"What are they planning to do," she cried, "that they know you'll resist if you can?"

The great bronze doors slammed shut on her words.

Through her barred window, Zaranda watched the blue planet Chandos, so near in its circuit about the sun that it showed not just a disk but a hint of roundness, rise up out of the east. Scarcely had it mounted the sky than the faint light of Anadia began to well up from the horizon. She thought of her observatory tower back home in Morninggold, wondered if she would ever watch the stars and playful planets from it again.

Blinking to keep back the tears, she said, "You seem concerned, Your Grace."

Seated at the table, the most recent of her steady stream of visitors raised his head sharply from his hand, like a man who's caught himself dozing off. "It is nothing, Zaranda Star. Or rather ... but I cannot allow personal considerations to cloud my vision of duty to city and country."

"Which is to say the lord of the city pays too close attention to your daughter."

"Enough!" snapped Duke Hembreon, jumping to his feet with alacrity a younger man might envy. "I have taken pains to see that you are treated well, but you are still a prisoner. Do not presume too greatly upon my goodwill."

"Still a prisoner," Zaranda said, "and still charged with nothing."

Hembreon frowned. "As of today charges were formally levied against you in council. I have brought a bill of particulars." He held up a scroll tied with a purple ribbon.

"And why was I not present to answer those charges, as Zazesspurian law requires? I certainly didn't have any conflicting appointments."

He failed to meet her eye. "There were special considerations—extraordinary circumstances. . . ."

"Just keep talking that way," Zaranda said mock-approvingly. "We'll make a chaotic of you yet."

The old man's spine stiffened. "These are trying times. It is always easy to see which is the path of righteousness when one isn't actually called upon to make the choice."

"I appreciate that. But are you certain the path you want is the one marked, 'His Royal Majesty, Faneuil I'?"

"He stands for the rule of law. He stands for what Tethyr needs."

"Does he? I say he's unleashed disorder on Zazesspur. And it's due to get worse."

"On what do you base your reasoning, young woman?" He tried to sound sternly dismissive. He didn't quite make it.

Got you, you thin-lipped old pillar of rectitude, she thought. Doubt was her ally. "He wants you to go on and declare him king. Yet various of your fellow councilors already have second thoughts about the wisdom of acclaiming him lord of Zazesspur. He'll perceive that, or Armenides will. He needs some new crisis to catapult him onto the throne, and knows it."

" 'Crisis'? " The duke was too polite to sneer.

"Crisis. I think Zazesspur's due for a dose of civil disorder, sooner rather than later. Something that will make the people cry out for a strong hand to restore order." She tipped her head to the side and tapped one finger against her cheek. "I think he'll use Ravenak's ruffians. They're like boulders balanced precariously on the very brink of a precipice, wanting only the tiniest zephyr to

bring the whole mountainside crashing down."

"Preposterous!"

"You think so? Try this thought on for size: did anyone encounter a single darkling on Zazesspur's streets before Hardisty began his climb?"

"Woman, I will not stand to hear our new lord's name besmirched. Good evening. Officer of the watch, I wish to be let out at once!"

Immediately bolts began to slide back on the far side of the door. "All I ask," Zaranda said, "is that you remember what I told you."

He gave her a lambent-eyed look of disgust and went out.

* * * * *

Beneath her the bed turned to viscous blackness; without chance to react, she was swallowed up. And then she was falling, endlessly, endlessly—but not endlessly enough. Below her, vanishingly small but somehow clear, a shadowed shape writhed, greater black against blackness.

No matter how you fight it, no matter what you do, you will come to Me, that hated voice hissed. Why struggle against the inevitable? You might spare yourself no little pain.

Still she fell. As she fell, she seemed to glimpse scenes flashing past: a seething caldron whose contents she did not dare examine; foul creatures opening a grate that led to the streets from the sewers beneath the city; a procession of wailing children, yoked together neck to neck, shuffling forward toward a black galley lolling at anchor in some vast flooded cavern... And always the blackness below, yearning for her, reaching for her with tentacles of black... .

She was dashed into consciousness as if by a plunge into icy water. For a moment she lay gasping, so coated in sweat that she seemed in imminent danger of slipping off the bed onto the floor. Then her ears resolved the sounds that had brought her out of sleep.

Bells. And a faint murmur, as of many distant voices raised in anger.

She rose and walked to the window. No planets were visible, and the moon and its bright attendants were absent. But by pressing her face hard against one wall and staring as far to one side of the window as she could, she could see orange light staining the sky, as if Selune were trying to rise in the south.

Zazesspur was burning.

* * * * *

Zaranda sat back onto the sill. The morning sun lay warm on her back, despite being filtered by overcast. The smell of rain, past and future, came through the open window.

"I'm sorry," she said, "about your shop, and most of all, about your father."

Simonne Soiltender—"White Eyebrow" had been her father's nickname—sat on Zaranda's stool looking very small. She wore a leather jerkin over a saffron blouse and sand-colored hose. Her voluminous black hair was done up in a bun and covered by a bandanna whose gaiety clashed with her demeanor.

"You of all folk are the last who owe apology," she said. She was turning her toothed-wheel holy sign of Gond over and over in strong, capable fingers. It was finely milled of steel, which the god held the noblest of metals, preferring its utility to the showiness of silver, platinum, or gold. "You warned him time and again."

"And yet I might have helped precipitate his murder, by facing down those

ravers in his shop last year."

"Just as likely you forestalled it. Such folk want victims, not confrontation; it's weakness that arouses their bloodlust. My father's confirmed passivity marked him as a target. Once we mustered opposition, ill-armed and untrained as it was, the rioters fell back smartly enough."

She let the medallion drop and buried her face in her hands. Tears leaked between the fingers. "Oh, Father, Father. If only I'd had the strength to disobey you before it was too late!"

Zaranda came to her and laid an arm around shaking shoulders. "Grieve, for you must. But don't burden your soul with regrets. You won't serve your father's memory by crippling yourself with might-have-beens."

The priestess clung to Zaranda, and her slight but sturdy frame was racked by great, silent sobs. Zaranda gently stroked her friend's head. Her blue-gray eyes leaked a few tears of their own, but silently; she would do her grieving for White Eyebrow later, if she were still alive.

At last the tremors dwindled, and Simonne pulled away. "You're right," she said. "Gond teaches us ever to look to the future."

"Well said, my friend." Zaranda sat down in her chair across the desk from her visitor. "What do you see the future as holding?"

"Extinction for the gnomes of Zazesspur," Simonne replied, "unless we fight back."

Zaranda smiled. "Fighting back is a commodity I specialize in."

Simonne nodded. "I know. I didn't come just to bear news of my father's death." She sat upright. "I wish to engage the services of Star Protectives to teach us how to defend ourselves. My father left some treasure hidden where the marauders couldn't get to it, and I have some small wealth of my own."

"You needn't concern yourself—" Zaranda began.

The priestess held up a hand. "Please. Followers of Gond give charity, but do not accept it. Nor is it wise for gnomes to come to you larger folk as supplicants; my father was right about that, as about so many things."

"Indeed, your father was a wise gnome. And you're a worthy daughter. But let us leave the matter of payment for later; I'll trust you to pay, and if you so choose, you will trust me not to gouge you."

"So let it be done," Simonne said with a businesslike nod.

"Now, my freedom of action's a bit curtailed right now, so when it comes to training, you're best advised to try to reach my people outside the city. In fact, since you insist on giving recompense, your so doing would be of great service to me, and go far toward repaying whatever help I render you."

"We can do that. We prefer to live within the laws as much as possible, but as you know, we're not slavish. When the law becomes intolerable, it is our way to slide around insofar as we can."

"I know."

"So rest assured that we shall quickly contact your friends outside; walls and patrols cannot contain us."

Zaranda gripped the table's edge for support; the flood of relief made her dizzy. Though her people could do nothing to help her, though the rumors of dissension and dissolution might well be true—still, what a relief to *know* how her friends fared.

"Thank you. Now, you managed to extemporize a self-defense force to rout the Hairheads. That's an excellent start. I can tell you—"

"A moment, please, gnome-friend." Simonne's large eyes were solemn. "The council—or at least Baron Hardisty—looks askance at attempts by the people to defend themselves. Can we safely discuss such matters, here in the heart of city hall?"

Zaranda laughed out loud. "Of all my visitors, you're the first to question that. The powerful and the putatively wise have been tramping through my humble abode by the hour, working their jaws with never a thought that anyone might be eavesdropping!" She shook her head. "There are tricks I've heard of, speaking tubes built directly into a building to convey conversations to secret listeners. I've found no sign of such in my cell, though I'm far from expert enough to guarantee we're safe. And I've sensed no dweomer play directed against me—but again, a sufficiently puissant wizard could cast a clairaudience spell and I'd never feel it."

She shrugged. "But among my ever-so-candid visitors have been almost all the council. *They* saw no reason to guard their speech. Perhaps neither their intellect nor wisdom are such as to astonish all Toril, but I trust them to be astute in the matter of keeping their own hides intact."

"Fair enough," the priestess said. "Now, what can you tell me?"

For an hour Zaranda sketched out a plan for whipping up a serviceable self-defense force. "Now," she concluded, "a show of force—more, of determination—will most likely deter would-be pogrom-makers like the ravers; as you said, they seek sport, not the chance to see their own blood spill. But if you face organized aggression—" she meant the bronze-and-blues, but saw no reason to tempt fate by being unnecessarily explicit—"it's paramount not to confront them directly. Never meet strength with strength; instead give way like water, and like water flow around and in behind them. And, like water, you can erode them, given patience and resolve."

The priestess rose. "Your words are sound. I will remember them. Thank you. Now I must go. I'll get in touch with your people as soon as I can."

She turned to go. "One thing," Zaranda said. "I've been having . . . disquieting dreams. . . ."

"As have we all."

"During one especially bad one I had a vision: a black galley, moored in some half-flooded cavern beneath the city, taking on a load of stolen children."

"I've heard the rumors," Simonne said.

"Fell things go on beneath any city; that's the way of Faerun. But my dreams . . . they seem to come from *below*."

"The darklings come from the sewers."

"So they do—but stay clear of them; you'll not have the strength to meet them on their own ground. The black galley, though—"

"We can deal with its crew and accomplices, if indeed they're down there. Such evil must be stopped." The priestess showed a distinctly nongnomish grin. "And who knows? We may bring some fascinating bits of knowledge to light."

* * * * *

Come to me, the Voice sang, dry and insistent as desert wind. *Join me. Think what I have to offer: the power to make of things what they ought to be.*

Lying on her back, Zaranda moaned and thrashed her head from side to side. There was no escaping the sibilant caress of that Voice.

Come to me, Zaranda. You are mine already. Come to me and know the power; come to me and spare yourself the pain.

* * * * *

The opening of her cell door was like the breaking of a spell. She sat up, clutching sweat-sodden sheets to herself, throwing up a palm to ward off lantern light that seemed to pierce her eyes like spears.

Shapes resolved from the glare as her eyes adjusted: Duke Hembreon, tall, cloaked, and grave, backed by city police. Others filed in until the small chamber was packed—Lord Hardisty, Armenides, Shaveli Sword-Master, the latter carrying a large leathern bag.

"To what do I owe the honor?" she asked.

The duke shook his magnificent white head. "Ah, Zaranda, to think that I believed you when you said you intended no treachery. Poorly have you served my faith."

She slid her legs over the bed's edge and sat all the way up, winding the sheet more carefully about her. "What are you talking about?"

"We have brought you a small present, Countess Morninggold," Armenides said unctuously. The baron nodded. Shaveli opened the sack, thrust his hand in.

It came out holding the head of Artalos the armorer by the topknot.

"The Sword-Master's specials caught him attempting commerce with the enemies of Zazesspur and Tethyr," Hardisty said. "We have had a most enlightening conversation."

The severed head opened its eyes. "Zaranda," it croaked. "I'm sorry. I thought I could help. Please—"

Armenides clapped his hands. Artalos's eyes rolled upward in their sockets, and his long jaw hung slack.

Gods! Zaranda thought. Simonne! Blood began to seep into the wad of sheet clutched in her right hand, where the nails had bit clean through linen into the palm. "Why have you done this to him? Even if he sought to reach my friends, they're no enemies of Zazesspur."

Shaveli laughed. "I loved the look in your eyes when he opened his. Have you missed me, then, my pretty little countess?"

"Faneuil, silence your cur!" snapped Hembreon. The Sword-Master looked poison at him. Ignoring him, the old duke stepped forward to stand gazing down at Zaranda with pain in his deep-sunk eyes.

"Your Star Protective Services are encamped before the city," he said. "They swear to free you by force. A thousand strong they are—"

Zaranda's laugh rang like a brazen gong of Thay. "A thousand against a city such as Zazesspur? What kind of threat is that? They might as well be a thousand children for all the harm they can do to you behind your walls!"

"—and more march hourly to join them, from all over Tethyr."

She stood. "But that's absurd. If nothing else, Shield of Innocence knows better than to lead such troops against fortifications so strong, manned by regular troops."

"Our intelligence indicates the orog no longer leads," Hardisty said.

"And if we required further proof of your perfidy, consorting with a great-orc of the Thighbone-Splitter tribe would suffice to condemn you," Armenides said.

"He's been accused of treachery in what these miscreants choose to

regard as your 'kidnapping,' " the Lord of Zazesspur continued. "He is transported in chains. A mute ranger leads the rebels, and a half-elf bard speaks for him."

Zaranda sank back to the bed and covered her face in her hands.

"We should welcome the advent of all the rebels in Tethyr," Armenides said. "When they have conveniently gathered together in the open country around Zazesspur, Lord Faneuil will muster the civic guard and the knights of the city, and behold!" He held up his hands and flung open his fingers with the air of one unveiling a major miracle. "No more rebellion."

"Zaranda Star," Duke Hembreon declared, "your treason is manifest. Therefore, not without regret, the city council of Zazesspur has decreed that you must pay the penalty. At noon tomorrow—that is, the day following this morning's sunrise—you shall suffer death by breaking upon the great wheel of justice in the midst of the plaza. At the same hour shall the lord of the city be crowned King Faneuil I of all Tethyr."

She looked up. Her eyes gleamed with wetness, but her cheeks were dry.

"Nothing your executioner can do," she said in a low voice, "will cause me half the pain of the tidings you've brought me."

Shaveli's ugly face split in a sunny smile. "Don't count upon that, Countess," he said. "For I'm the one who'll do the honors."

"I can't believe they're going to put Countess Morninggold to death tomorrow," the gangly, pimple-faced youth whispered loudly. The stinking water that lapped their ankles and the slimy sewer walls took his words and cast them in all directions, in the faces of the little party and bouncing down the passageway. "Is there nothing we can do?"

A drop fell from the low-groined ceiling onto the back of Simonne's neck and rolled down it like an ice slug. She forced herself not to think of what it was.

"Yes," she said more softly. "We can try to be quiet and not get caught. Beyond that—Gond teaches us to make the best use of what fortune places in our hands. We can but trust to his providence and our own resources."

By jittering torchlight she surveyed her doughty band: gnomes interspersed with youthful humans and even a smattering of half-elves, faces green-tinted at the stench and knowledge of what was gurgling about their boots. Some of the non-gnomes were fellow Gond followers, others the priestess's friends. The way they clutched their motley collection of knives, clubs, swords, and short bows showed far too plainly for Simonne's taste that none of them was a fighter by training or experience.

She looked to the figure by her side. It was even shorter than she, clad in a dark brown cloak with hood thrown back to reveal a head of chestnut curls. It held a hoodwinked bull's-eye lantern in one small hand.

"You're sure this is the way, Nikdemane Birdsong?"

The halfling nodded, a trifle impatiently. "Down this path, through the narrow passage that forks off to the left there yonder. It's the back way into a subterranean lagoon that feeds into the Sulduskoon and thence to the sea. There's an ancient stone pier where we used to smuggle goods whose makers didn't care to purchase guild stamps or ask a syndic's leave to do business."

"You'd not steer us wrong?" she asked, wondering what she would do if he did.

He gave her a look of fine halfling disdain. "I'm a thief, tinker priestess. But I steal goods, not children. Not even bigfeet deserve to be served so."

She nodded. She wondered at her own motivation in undertaking this mad caper. She suspected with a touch of chagrin that she and her followers shared a reason: the creed of their red-bearded smith god was *Action counts!* Yet they all did far more talking than acting.

Here was their chance to take action that would truly count.

Father, she thought, I don't think even you could disapprove. But withal, I do this for you.

She gestured with her three-shot repeating pistol crossbow, recently invented by a fellow priest of Gond Wonderbringer. "Let's go. And *please* keep it quiet!"

* * * * *

Lying side by side on their bellies, Simonne and Nik Birdsong inched forward up a sloping passage uncomfortably low even for the gnome woman, although the halfling had walked insouciantly upright until both went prone for the final stretch. Gaining the lip first, the little thief gave Simonne a quick grin of vindication. As he turned back, the priestess saw his expression change to

disgust. She writhed up beside him.

The tunnel mouth opened twenty feet above the floor of a vast torch-lit chamber. The black galley bobbed gently alongside a mossy stone pier, tied fore and aft to protrusions that might once have been winged statues, but had long since worn to amorphousness—an indication of their age, securely hidden as they were from the erosive forces of wind and weather. The black square-rigged sail hung limp from the yardarm, but there was no mistaking the stylized black nail and Zrune against a white circle—the emblem of the Zhentarim.

Simonne's breath caught in her throat. There was also no mistaking the identities of the men busy herding a coffle of weeping, stumbling children up the gangplank and into the slave ship.

All wore the pure-white robes of the priests of Ao.

* * * * *

Angry murmuring and clatter awoke Zaranda from a fitful but blessedly dreamless sleep. She rose from the bed, feeling as she did so an internal blow to the heart: this is my last morning. She sought to pass the shock off with a joke, murmuring, "Need they make such racket raising the wheel of justice?" as she shuffled to the window.

Dawn was turning an overcast sky the color of sour milk. Down on the plaza men fought. Some wore the bronze armor of Hardisty's civic guard. Against them strove men in tradesman's garb, with here and there a black-shelled city policeman among them.

Zaranda blinked and dabbed at sleepy eyes. When she looked again, the scene was the same. She marked dark, unmoving shapes strewn liberally across the plaza's sandstone flagging. Some only approximated the human form, not all of them closely. Raising her eyes, she saw pillars of smoke upholding the clouds.

She sat sideways on the sill and watched. The battle flowed off the plaza and out of her field of view. Which side was winning, she couldn't tell, if indeed either was. Occasional armed bands hurried across the plaza, looking apprehensively over their shoulders. Now and again Zaranda saw a roil of activity away up one of the streets radiating from the central square.

Try as she might, she could make no sense of what was happening. She gave it every effort: better than contemplating the way her life would end a few hours hence. . . .

The sound of three door bolts being shot back sent her heart into her throat. She gasped. Then she set her jaw, rose, and faced the door with chin high and shoulders squared.

The door opened. Duke Hembreon came in. He wore plate armor that had once been enameled blue with fastidious white trim. Now it was blood-splashed and fire-blackened. His head was bare; blood from a wound stained pink the hair on the right side of his head. In one steel-gauntleted hand, he carried a broadsword with a notched, gore-crusted blade.

"Good morrow, Your Grace," Zaranda said. "Has the council grown too impatient to wait for noon?"

The old nobleman staggered across the floor and sat down with a thump and a clangor. He grounded his sword tip on the floor and leaned on the hilt as if the chair didn't offer support enough to keep him upright.

"The council is no more," he said. "Zaranda Star, I owe you a mighty

apology."

She cocked an eyebrow and crossed her arms. "Is that so? Well, Your Grace, I have been expropriated, pursued, persecuted, kidnapped, tortured, slandered, and sentenced to agonizing death. With all due respect, you'll have to do better than that."

He glared at her. Slowly the fires of anger died from his blue eyes, and his great head drooped.

"You are right, Countess Morninggold. More right than you know, for I must crave a boon of you."

"A boon?" She laughed. "Start talking, Your Grace."

"Where ought I to begin? Last night a party of armed citizens surprised a Zhentarim slave galley taking on a shipment of kidnapped Zazesspurian children in a cavern beneath the city. Supervising the vile deed were men wearing the robes of Ao's supposed priesthood."

"So Ao hasn't decided to take an active interest in the affairs of this plane after all."

"The survivors confessed they were in fact priests of Cyric."

Zaranda sucked in a sharp breath. "That's in character, I suppose. That upstart god loves deception for its own sake." The greatest evil deity currently known in the Realms, Cyric had been born during the Time of Troubles, even as Bhaal, Myrkul, and Bane, whose portfolios he had usurped, were destroyed.

"And Armenides—?"

The duke held up a hand. "In hiding. But more of that anon. Pray let me tell my tale in order. It is painful enough."

Zaranda gestured him to proceed.

"Scarcely had word of the discovery reached the council's ears than a frightful thing came to pass. Those children of our most prominent citizens who had joined the All-Friends rose up and began to slaughter their parents. Deymos, Baron Zam, and the Lady Korun are known dead at their offsprings' hands; Hafzul Gorbon stove in his only daughter's head with a mace as she stood over her mother's corpse with dripping blade, then lay down beside his wife and slit his own throat. Others—" He shook his head.

"Gods! Tatrina?"

He sighed. "She has vanished into the Palace of Governance, wherein Hardisty has crowned himself king and declared her his consort. At least I dare hope she has not been . . . affected."

"I hope so as well. But why do citizens and constables battle blue-and-bronzes in the streets?"

"An hour before dawn, even as the last of the murderous youths and maidens were being subdued, darklings poured forth from the sewers in unimaginable profusion and began to slay. The civic guard got orders not to fight them. Many deserted; others tried to disarm citizens and constabulary and became embroiled in the fighting you saw. A number are fortified up with the usurper Hardisty. Most have barricaded themselves in their barracks and wait to see which way fortune's winds blow."

He shook his head, like an old lion who has found temporary shelter from a pack of hounds who have harried him near death. "The hinges are blasted off the gates of all the hells. Earl Ravenak's swine rampage against nonhumans and foreigners. Artisans battle the syndics of their very guilds. The supposed

forces of order fight one another. The scions of Zazesspur's finest families are turned to monsters by some means none can divine, have slaughtered the leaders of our city and been slaughtered in their turn. And all must be overthrown if the darklings are not stopped."

He raised his head as if he had a tombstone yoked to his neck and looked at Zaranda. "It seems we are to know the Ten Black Days of Eleint again, all compressed into a single day."

She went to the stool, sat down, and began to massage her temples. "So," she said. "The evil ran deeper than I imagined . . . than I *could* have imagined." She looked up at the duke. "What do you want of me?"

"I have myself just come from fighting the darklings. We are sorely pressed. The issue—the very survival of Zazesspur—remains in the gravest doubt."

"You want my help."

"I beseech your help, Countess Morninggold. Though I fear that all the help you can possibly provide might not suffice to stem the evil tide."

She spread her hands. "I'd love to oblige, Your Grace, but I have an appointment to be spread out on a giant wheel and have all my bones broken in a few hours."

Hembreon moaned. "You are pardoned. Your sentence of death is overturned and rendered null. We were deceived."

"Has the council voted to nullify my sentence? You said yourself that most were unaccounted for."

With surprising alacrity the duke whipped up his sword. "Whoever tries to gainsay me, I will strike down with my own hand. I warrant your life with my own. This I swear on my honor."

"Very well." Zaranda nodded briskly. Turning to the table, she took up pen and parchment. "Send a patrol to convey this message beneath a flag of truce to my friends. Needless to say, you must also alert such forces as remain loyal to the council that we're on the same side now."

The duke was too soul-weary to take umbrage at being ordered about like a scullery whelp by his erstwhile prisoner. "It shall be done."

"It'll take time for our reinforcements to arrive. See if you can scare me up some spellbooks. I'll memorize such spells as I can while we wait."

"You will not join the fight at once?"

"You flatter me, Your Grace. Would my single blade make that much difference against numberless hordes of darklings? Especially since I'm without my magic sword?" She shook her head. "As it is, I don't know what good my few paltry spells might do, either. But I'll seize any advantage I can with both hands."

The duke sighed, rose heavily. "I had hoped—" His voice trailed away, and he blinked back tears.

Zaranda looked up from her writing. "Out with it."

"My daughter . . . I had hoped—if there *is* any hope—that you might rescue her."

"What if she doesn't want to be rescued?" The look of agony that washed over the old man's features brought her instant shame.

"Don't worry, Your Grace," she said quickly. "The first item on my agenda is breaking into the Palace of Misrule over there and cutting King Faneuil the First and Last's black heart right out of his chest."

She finished writing, signed the parchment with a flourish, and held it out to

him. "After my friends get here."

* * * * *

A knock at the door roused her from a surprisingly deep sleep—surprising in that she had simply lain down to rest her eyes while waiting, and was not plagued by nightmares. Perhaps she was too tired to dream. Or perhaps the owner of that dry and loathly Voice had more pressing claims on its attention.

She woke with a fearful start: they've come to take me and break me! By the time she remembered that those festivities had been called on account of reign—the reign of evil, to be exact—the door had opened and into the city hall clerk's office, which she had commandeered after her release, came Nyadnar.

"It speaks well for your presence of mind that you can sleep under these circumstances," the sorceress said.

"What surprises me is that I could sleep last night at all," Zaranda said, rising from the makeshift cot. "What can I do for you?"

Day turned the pallor of Nyadnar's features marmoreal, giving her the weird, poignant beauty of an ancient statue brought to life. She wore her customary robe of midnight-blue velvet, and over it a gray cloak to shield her from the sporadic drizzle. From beneath the cloak she produced a bundle of books and age-yellowed papers, bound up by a purple ribbon. These she laid on the table.

"My early spellbooks," the enchantress said. "Any spells known to you, you will find therein."

Zaranda stared at the bundle as if it might at any moment transform itself into a raging dragon. "The world must be spinning seriously out of balance," she said, "for you to take such measures on my behalf."

"Don't leap to conclusions; that displays a lack of mental rigor," Nyadnar said. "It might be necessary that you fail spectacularly."

"Then I'll have to try my best to disappoint you," Zaranda said with a she-wolf grin. "In the meantime, though, I thank you."

* * * * *

The sun was setting when another knock roused Zaranda from her studies. "What is it?" she called, knuckling sand-blasted eyes.

A policeman opened the door. "His Grace the duke sends his regards, milady. He bids me tell you your friends approach."

* * * * *

"Well met, Zaranda Star!" called Farlon the Handsome, waving jauntily from the back of his dapple-gray mare. "Your beauty is most resplendent, all things considered."

Mounted on his dark bay, Stillhawk met her eye and nodded greeting.

It took all her strength to keep her knees from buckling right there on the city hall steps. The pressure of tears unshed stung her eyes.

The two men swung down from their horses and walked up to her. When Zaranda made no move to embrace them, the half-elf cocked an eyebrow inquisitively.

"Where are the others?" she asked quietly. "Where are Shield, and Chen? Where's Goldie?"

The sky was gray as a gull's back, save near the horizon where fire held sway. The air was thick with the smells of death and burning and decay. The darklings stank like dead things even when alive, if alive they were. Even if

Zazesspur survived, it would take time to eradicate their stench.

"I thought you'd have heard," said Farlorn. "The beast betrayed you to the baron's men; we clapped him in irons and have kept him there ever since. The girl has been in a most powerful sulk since you vanished. She refused to accompany us today."

Have I done wrong? Stillhawk signed.

Zaranda touched his arm. "If so, not intentionally. I suspected Shield for a time myself. But I feel as if a wrong has been done."

Farlorn tut-tutted and shook his head. "Ah, Zaranda. Once again, you're letting the softness of your heart weaken that hard head of yours—"

"Hey! Zaranda! *Randi!*"

Zaranda turned. Trotting across the plaza from the south came Goldie, bearing Chenowyn on her back.

At their side loped Shield of Innocence.

"You're sure this is the way into the palace?" Zaranda asked.

Farlorn's beautiful features assumed a long-suffering look by torchlight. "I didn't spend our previous sojourn in the city cutting out paper dolls. Naturally the palace attracted my interest, as a monument to elephantine bad taste if for no other reason. I made inquiry, and explored some on my own. That's one nice thing about trying to infiltrate buildings built less than an eon ago; it's a lot easier to buy a workman a jack of good ale at a tavern than it is to summon up his shade."

Zaranda's party was recapitulating Simonne's sewer-crawl of the night before, which had precipitated today's crisis. Zaranda's group, while smaller, was much more seasoned. Farlorn led the way with a bull's-eye lantern in one hand and his rapier in the other, eschewing any armor but the leather jerkin he wore over a white blouse with lace at throat and cuffs. Beside him walked Stillhawk with an arrow nocked to his elvish longbow and long sword belted at his hip; as was his custom, he too wore no armor, though his heavy leather tunic gave some protection.

Next came Zaranda, armed with a splendid if non-magical long sword from Hembreon's armory and a long-bladed dagger with a knuckle bow for parrying. Unless mounted, she hated a shield's encumbrance; her left hand held a torch. Her only armor was a steel cuirass. Chen followed, unarmored in loose blouse and trousers, with a dagger thrust through her belt, primarily for effect. She refused to be left behind, and given her service in springing the great orog, Zaranda didn't argue.

Shield of Innocence brought up the rear. The orog was magnificent and fearful in armor which, like the scimitars in his taloned hands, he had crafted himself under the guidance of Torm, whose gauntlet was inlaid in gold in the center of his breastplate. He wore a helmet close-molded to his head with cheekpiece flanges that left his pointed ears clear to facilitate hearing, and steel greaves and vambraces, all polished to a mirror shine. His expression was serene. If his imprisonment had engendered resentment in his mighty breast, it didn't show on his face.

The tunnel running under the palace was high enough that all save Shield could walk without stooping. The smell was no less appalling for the comparatively short time the sewer had been in use, but Zaranda had endured worse. None of the others wasted breath on it either. Chen, who was not normally slow to speak up if things were not to her liking, had always been indifferent to smells, most notably her own, in the days before Zaranda brought her around on the hygiene issue. Farlorn, most aesthetically sensitive of the lot, displayed the loftiness of his contempt by not deigning to complain.

The tunnel began to branch to serve the various parts of the vast structure. Zazesspur, with its wealth of innovative and assiduous artisans, had enjoyed running water and indoor plumbing longer even than most great cities of Faerun; it was a simple enough technic, involving no magic, unless one were Calishite and simply *had* to have one's needs served by a bowl of water summoning. The half-elf led them left, right, left again down passages that diminished at every fork, so that even Chen, shortest of the group, had to double over, and Shield had to waddle in a painful-looking squat. His placid look never wavered.

"Ware upward," Farlorn called back over his shoulder. "Anything falling from above is unlikely to be the manna of the gods!"

"Thanks so much for reminding us," Zaranda said in a low voice. Farlorn laughed musically. "And could you please be quiet? If Hardisty hears voices floating up out of his commode he's not going to think it's an angelic chorus come to sing his praises."

The half-elf grinned at her and, maddeningly, laughed aloud. His olive cheeks were flushed, eyes fever-bright. From experience, Zaranda knew that when the manic mood came upon him there was no containing him. She likewise knew that, while in such an exalted state he might take risks that seemed insane, he had never brought disaster on himself or his comrades. Yet.

Just when it seemed Zaranda's thigh muscles were going to split straight across, Stillhawk and Farlorn straightened. Zaranda came up alongside them and found a round passage rising straight up.

"What's this," she asked, "a giant's oubliette?"

Farlorn shone the beam of his bull's-eye over metal rungs running up the tube's side to a circular wooden hatch ten feet up. "An access passage, so that workmen can enter the sewers in case of blockage."

Zaranda drew in a deep breath and blew it out through pursed lips. "Once we're up, there'll be no turning back."

She turned and embraced the others in turn. The rest exchanged handshakes and hugs. This might be the last chance to say good-bye.

Stillhawk came to Shield of Innocence, paused, stuck out his hand. The great orc gripped him firmly, forearm to forearm. Then the orog turned to Farlorn.

The half-elf sneered and turned away.

Zaranda looked at him, then up at the hatch. "Locked?"

"Of course. Did you think this would be easy?"

"I thought it would be harder already." She shut her eyes and concentrated. It was difficult to summon the dweomer; fatigue dragged her down with leaden fingers. Get through this and you can rest all you want, she told herself. One way or another.

She spoke the spell. The squeal of metal on metal sounded through the thick wooden disk as a bolt withdrew. Farlorn sheathed his rapier, swarmed up the rungs like a squirrel, and tested the hatch.

He spat a curse in Elven. "Still locked!"

The words struck Zaranda like a fist in the belly. The breath chuffed out of her, and she bent over as if in physical pain, resting hands on thighs. She had had but the one knock spell memorized. "Farlorn, it's not like you to do so slipshod a job of scouting."

"No one else did any kind of scouting at all."

"That's fair enough," Zaranda said. She straightened and scrutinized the disk. Its blank, rough wood suggested nothing.

"I can try to open it," Chen offered.

"You haven't learned the knock spell," Zaranda reminded her.

"Maybe I can use my other powers."

"No. They're too unpredictable. And I've a feeling there are things within the palace for whom such a concentration of dweomer would be like tocsins ringing. I'm uneasy enough about the puny little spell I cast."

"The great Zaranda Star, admitting defeat?" said Farlorn. "I don't believe it."
"Don't," Zaranda said. "Yet. Still—we go in here, or try to batter down the front door."

"Let me," Shield of Innocence said. He strode toward the ladder. Farlorn flowed down like a cat, jumped clear so as not to let the orog near him. Sheathing swords across his back, Shield climbed up. He tested the disk with his hand, then braced his feet on the rungs, laid the side of his head and his shoulder to the wood, and *heaved*.

Veins bulged from forehead and great corded neck. His spine creaked loudly. Wood groaned like a soul in torment, and with a *twang* and a *crash* the hatch popped free.

"So much for stealth," Chenowyn said.

"We had few choices," Zaranda said, "and now must play out the game we chose. Up, now, and quickly."

The orog had already disappeared through the hole. Yellow lamplight streamed down into the sewer. Farlorn swarmed up, then Stillhawk with bow slung over his shoulder. Zaranda let Chen go next, keeping long sword ready, then followed

She found herself in an octagonal chamber of about the same dimensions as Hardisty's receiving room on the topmost floor. Four shadowed passageways led out of the chamber. A pair of thick columns flanked each entrance about six feet in. Each pillar was fitted with a black-iron sconce in which a torch flared.

The hatch was three feet across and six inches thick. Shield picked it up as if it were a serving tray and fitted it back into the hole. Two heavy brass slide-latches had secured it. One was neatly opened, the other a twisted ruin.

"Put them back in place," Zaranda said. "We'll just have to hope nobody chancing by gives them too close a look."

The orog did as he was bid.

Which way? signed Stillhawk.

"This way lies the rear of the palace," said Farlorn, indicating a corridor.

"As good a way as any," Zaranda said, and led the group that way.

There came a rumble, a friction squeal, and a thunderclap *crash*. Zaranda dropped to her knees, ears ringing. She snapped her head around.

A five-foot-thick column of stone had dropped from the ceiling to seal the hatch.

"Trapped!" she cried. "Farlorn, you've led us into a thieves' foyer!" In the Empires of the Sands it was customary for dwellings of pretense to be built so as to offer prospective thieves a means of ingress—not too easy, just enough to challenge the skills of a self-respecting rogue. The covert entrances led not to treasures but to traps, of varying degrees of lethality.

This one was obviously designed to capture, not kill. Feeling the dull throb of failure beginning in her temples, Zaranda gathered herself to dash for the corridor.

"Correct, Countess Morninggold," a familiar voice said cheerily. "But not just *any* thieves' foyer."

In the entryway before her appeared Armenides, white-robed and smiling. Armed men thronged the passage behind him. At the same time blue-and-bronzes stepped out from behind the pillars, leveling crossbows at the group.

Zaranda stopped. She flicked a tiny pellet at the false Ao priest, murmuring

height and range, and flung herself backward to escape the fireball's blast.

The pellet struck the archpriest's sternum and bounced. It fell to the floor by his sandaled feet. He knelt, picked it up, sniffed it.

"Bat dung and sulfur." He smiled. "Why, Countess, I do believe you've just tried to incinerate me." He laughed delightedly. "Did you not think other walls than the dungeon's might be imbued with the god bones of Tantras?"

She squeezed her eyes shut.

"Now I'll trouble you to put down your weapons," Armenides said.

Someone walked past her. She opened her eyes to see the half-elf approaching Armenides. She scrambled to her feet. "Farlorn—no!"

The bard walked between two crossbowmen, turned, and smiled. "Your concern is touching, Zaranda, my love. But quite misplaced. I have nothing to fear from my friends."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we've all done our poor orc friend a grave disservice. He's a sincere servant of good, may all such die in agony—as will you anon, I might add. I'm your traitor."

"What are you saying?" Zaranda asked, stunned.

"Consider the love of a woods-elf maid for a human man. Then consider a cow who can jump over Selune in a single bound: both have the same chance of existing. It was rape that engendered me, not romance."

His dark eyes caught the torchlight like the eyes of an animal, and his features seemed feral. "I grew to adulthood scarcely tolerated by my true folk, my mother's folk—and worse, pitied by them. At last I performed deeds that all the pity in the wide green forests of Faerun would not serve to cover, and fled. Since then I have walked among my father's people, the ravisher's kind, and secretly I have paid my mother's debt a thousandfold."

He looked Zaranda in the eyes. "Oh, you were sweet, Zaranda Star! Woman warrior, woman wizard, war leader, merchant—beautiful and haughty. What delight it was to bend you to my will, knowing always that some day I would bring you ruin."

"What was done to your mother was terrible," she said in a level voice. "But why keep it clutched to your breast all these years like your most precious possession?"

"Because it is my most precious possession! In hatred have I found all that I am; I have found a purpose, a destiny!" He reached inside his blouse, brought forth a medallion on which were embossed three lightning bolts branching from a central point.

"When I was driven from my ancestral forest I consecrated my life to Talos the Destroyer. I dream of the day when humankind is cast down in blood and ruin, and the wilderness reclaims its own!"

He let the medallion hang. "Long have I awaited my chance to strike a decisive blow. When we approached Zazesspur last year a Voice spoke to me in dreams. And I knew then that the time was come."

"A Voice?" Zaranda repeated. She swayed.

"Now I serve the One Below," the bard said. "I serve the Whisperer in Darkness. In his name have I destroyed you."

Armenides chuckled. "There. I'm sure we all feel better. Confession is so good for the soul. Now, please undo your sword belts and let them drop. You'll have no need for weapons where you're bound."

With a guttural roar of rage, Shield of Innocence hurled himself forward. Chenowyn screamed. Crossbows thumped. No non-magical armor could turn a crossbow quarrel at this range. The milled-steel missiles punched through Shield's breastplate with loud clangs and buried themselves in his flesh.

Bellowing, the great orc caught Farlorn's neck with one arm and swung him around. The half-elf screamed as crossbow bolts pierced him.

Zaranda tore her borrowed long sword from its scabbard. The crossbowmen who had shot Shield and Farlorn stood flat-footed, the realization slowly dawning that they were now disarmed. Zaranda hacked them down as they turned to flee. Stillhawk, bow and quiver still slung, snatched his own sword off the floor and attacked. A blue-and-bronze, quicker on the uptake than his fellows, snatched out his heavy broadsword and thrust at him. He swept the blade aside with a mighty stroke and spun the man back, unreeling blood streamers with the return.

Armenides stepped to the side. Behind him more crossbowmen aimed and loosed. Shield swung round, holding the feebly struggling bard before him. Half a dozen bolts struck the traitor. Some drove onward through metal to pierce the great orc's flesh.

"This way!" Zaranda shouted, pointing her bloodied sword at the entrance opposite the one occupied by Armenides and his troops. Chen had drawn her dagger and crouched beside her mentor, menacing air. Zaranda grabbed her arm. "Let's go!"

Though Chen complied, the ranger was reluctant. *Won't leave Shield*, he signed.

"No one's leaving anybody. Shield, bring a live one!"

The orog reached out a black-nailed hand, grabbed a nearby guard by the scruff as if grabbing a rabbit. Then he backed across the octagonal chamber, clutching his captive and the now-limp bard, looking like a child with two rag dolls. Shoulder to shoulder, Stillhawk backed with him, facing the enemy as the civic guards wrestled back their crossbow strings.

Zaranda practically flung Chen down the corridor. Shield and Stillhawk backed in as guardsmen finished cocking weapons and reached for fresh quarrels. Zaranda flung a handful of skunk cabbage leaves from her magic pouch, which Chen had brought her, past her comrades and onto the floor. Dense green smoke billowed.

Zaranda patted the air frantically with her hands, signing, *Down! Down!* Stillhawk understood at once and threw himself flat, drawing the orog and his captive down with him. Zaranda tackled Chenowyn and pinned her to the floor.

Steel bolts buzzed overhead to clatter off walls and ceiling. Zaranda lay a moment with blood drumming in her ears. None of the blue-and-bronzes had had the wit to reserve a shot in case their quarry was up to tricks.

"Run for the cross-passage," Zaranda hissed as she jumped up. Her voice was raw from breathing the fringes of the stinking cloud she'd raised. "Head left. Go!"

They did. For a moment Zaranda crouched, gazing at the body of Farlorn, sprawled on the floor. Then she followed her friends.

She dodged around the corner. Shield stood in the cross-passage calmly pulling a crossbow quarrel through his left biceps. At least four projectiles

jutted from his body.

"Can you still walk?" she asked him.

"Don't fear for me," he rumbled. Beside him Stillhawk pinned the prisoner to the wall, his sword tip pressed to the hollow of his throat. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine," Zaranda said. "You're badly hurt."

Shield took her sword hand in one bloody claw, raised it to his tusked mouth, kissed it. "Waste no tears on me, Mistress," he said. "I'll lose nothing today that hasn't been forfeit for a long time."

Coughing and choked curses echoed down the corridor. Zaranda stuck her head around the corner. Blue-and-bronzes were braving the noxious smoke. Several had torn the voluminous sleeves from their doublets and tied them over their faces. Two collapsed, retching, on the floor the instant they came through.

Zaranda plucked another pellet from her pouch, spoke words, hurled it, and ducked back as the corridor filled with fire and screams.

"Hardisty," she said to the terrified captive. "The false king. Lead us to him. And no wrong turns, or the orc will twist your head off."

* * * * *

Zaranda had misjudged the former Baron Hardisty. She was sure he would await the unfolding of events in his room on the uppermost floor, with his model city to keep him company.

But he was king now, even if he'd had to crown himself, and would play the role to the lasts and stays. He had prepared himself a throne room on the palace's ground floor and a throne to go with it, and he occupied both when Shield of Innocence put his shoulder to the fancy double doors and crashed them open.

A score of blue-and-bronzes stood between entrance and king, shifting weight from boot to boot and looking nervous. Behind them Tatrina sat slumped beside the huge gilt-washed throne. When the adventurers burst into the throne room, wild-eyed and bristling with weapons, she gasped, leapt to her feet, and tried to run to them.

The king caught her wrist. "Where are you going, my love?" he asked, baritone voice as beautifully modulated as if he asked if she wished to go for a ride in the country. "It's treason to desert your king. Or *lese-majeste* at least; I've never been clear on the distinction."

Zaranda pointed her sword at him. "Hardisty! You are deposed. Let the girl go and surrender, and we'll leave you with your life. Your freedom, even—if you'll help us stop the evil you set loose."

King Faneuil put back his head and laughed. His crown was a surprisingly modest circlet of gold. "Always fanciful, Zaranda. Might I point out that you're outnumbered?"

"Let's alter the balance, then," Zaranda said. She spoke mystic words and cast a pinch of sand at the guardsmen. Five slumped down, sound asleep, their halberds clattering to the marble floor beside them. The rest leveled weapons and charged.

Stillhawk drew back his bow and loosed. Not for nothing had the king spent years as a fighter. Already in motion as Stillhawk pulled his bowstring, he rolled over the arm of the throne as the arrow sang past to strike the back and vibrate at the precise point his crowned head had occupied a heartbeat before.

He came up with an arm around Tatrina's neck. "No, no," he said, wagging a finger at Stillhawk. "Don't try that again. Kill them."

The last was to his guardsmen, who were already trying their best. Stillhawk had re-slung his bow and was standing off three halberdiers with his long sword. Shield drew his two scimitars and began to lay about him. Zaranda ran straight at the guards. One pulled up short, clutching his halberd across his chest as if unsure how to deal with this menace. In passing, Zaranda gave him a jab to the face with the studded knuckleduster hilt of her left-hand dagger, then parried an overhand cut from a second foe.

Towing his reluctant consort behind, Faneuil dodged behind his throne and ducked under the corner of a huge tapestry depicting him, crowned in a laurel wreath, standing guard over a tiny stylized Zazesspur with sword in one upraised hand and a white radiance, representing Ao, in the palm of the other.

Zaranda slashed a guardsman across the fingers, causing him to shriek and drop his weapon. Another stabbed at her with his halberd. Zaranda beat the haft aside and lunged into a riposte that sent the tip of her sword through his throat. She was aware of Stillhawk on her left and Shield on her right working similar execution as they sought to win through and follow the king down his secret passage.

Chen had played little role in the proceedings. When she grabbed at Zaranda's sleeve from behind, the older woman's reflex reaction was a flash of irritation.

"Randi, *look!*" the girl cried.

Zaranda turned her head to see more blue-and-bronzes flooding the throne room through the double doors of the main entrance behind them, flowing to either side of Armenides, who stood with arms upraised, voicing an incantation.

By dint of long practice and hard-won experience, Zaranda had increased the suppleness and cogency of her mind enough that it could contain two fireball spells at a time. The effort in the thieves' foyer, aborted by the magic-deadening stones of Tantras, didn't count. She had one left in her, and she loosed it now.

The blast scattered guardsmen like skittles. A sphere of red flame engulfed the false priest. His flesh blackened, flowed, burned away—

Revealing his true form: a fiend with the body of a giant scorpion and the head of a bull, rearing eight feet above the rose-marble flagstones. His laughter filled the throne room.

"This isn't good," Zaranda said.

"Go!" Shield roared. His blades were in constant motion, flowing about his body in intertwining loops that struck down any guardsman heedless enough to wander near. It seemed impossible that any foe could strike at him through such tapestries of steel, but his breastplate was gashed, and his face and body bled from a dozen fresh wounds.

"Follow the king!" he shouted. "I'll hold them."

The orog charged. You're only an *apprentice* paladin, Zaranda wanted to scream. And Armenides must be a puissant fiend indeed: even with the aid of Cyric, lord of deceit, it would require mighty magics for a servant of evil to produce the spurious miracles with which Armenides had bolstered his claim that Ao had grown active in this plane.

But she knew *she* couldn't handle the monster. Any delay the great orc

could inflict would increase the others' chances. Of success, if not survival.

Stillhawk cut down the last of the king's guards who still showed fight. The rest had fled, and the sight of Armenides's horrid transfiguration only made them run the faster. Zaranda flipped up the tapestry's corner with her sword. A door yawned behind. A damp, cool breeze, touched with grave mold and brimstone, blew out of darkness into their faces.

Zaranda saw one of Shield's blades lop a short-clawed nipper off Armenides's jointed forelimb. Her heart leapt. The creature has plenty more, she reminded herself. She bundled Chen through the doorway and down a steep stairwell. An instant later Stillhawk followed them into darkness.

* * * * *

Zaranda's fireball had killed or incapacitated most of the men Armenides had brought with him to the throne room. But not all. Four swarmed over Shield of Innocence from behind, one jumping on his broad back, the others trying to pin his arms.

He roared and swept his arms forward, dashing two assailants' heads together before him. A third clung to his left arm. He split his skull with his right-hand scimitar.

The man on his back produced a single-edged dagger and began sawing at the orog's corded neck. Without relinquishing grip on his swords, Shield grabbed the man with both hands and raised him, squirming, above his head.

Another guardsman, hair blackened, crinkled, and smoking from Zaranda's fireball, took a running start and thrust the spike of his halberd into the small of Shield's back.

The orog bellowed and spun, torquing the halberd from the guardsman's grasp. He flung the man he held into the face of the one who had stabbed him. Then he reached back and plucked the weapon from his body.

Armenides caught him from behind by the arms and the legs and hoisted him in the air as easily as Shield had lifted the blue-and-bronze. "You betrayed your people and your gods," the false priest said in the voice he had used in human guise, "and now I'll flay the flesh right off your soul."

Blood spurted as pincers bit. Twisting in the monster's grasp, Shield lashed out with his right hand and opened a gash across Armenides's cheek. The bull-thing screamed in pain and dropped its prey as black blood jetted, smoking, from the wound.

Shield landed on his back. A blue-and-bronze loomed above him, halberd poised for a downward thrust. The orog hacked the man's legs from beneath him. Then he arched his body backward, snapped forward, and so regained his feet.

The monster towered over him. Shield raised his swords and charged.

Pincers caught him by arms and legs, lifted him clear of the floor again. The orog bellowed rage. His muscles heaved with all their awesome strength, but this time the monster had made sure of its grip. Shield was held immovably while other pincers made play. They cut the thick steel of his breastplate as if it were cheesecloth.

The thing that had called itself Armenides of Ao worked on the orog for longer than was strictly necessary. Then it tossed the great limp shape aside and glided forward on many legs, to the secret passageway and down.

The stairs led down through the dungeon levels Zaranda knew so well and on, to ever-lower reaches of echoing chambers and twisty corridors. The stonework ceased to be sharp-edged and new. The stones became rounded, lichen-grown, the mortar crumbly. Zaranda found herself wondering whether these catacombs were remnants of buildings razed to make way for the palace, or if they had entered the Underdark for true.

Side passages branched occasionally to the left or right. There was no ambiguity about which was the main pathway, however. Nor the right one—periodically they would catch a glimpse of Faneuil and his golden-haired captive, well ahead and below.

They had just begun descending a short flight of stairs when Stillhawk, bringing up the rear, grunted and fell across Zaranda's back. She screamed and lost her balance, and if she hadn't fallen against the wall she would have pitched headlong down the stairs.

A figure appeared in the doorway they had just quitted, raising a nocked short bow. Chen flung out an arm and screamed a single syllable. Energy darted from her outstretched fingertip and struck him in the chest. With a cry, he fell backward out of sight.

"I did it!" the girl exulted, grabbing Zaranda's arm and dancing up and down. "I hit him with a magic missile!"

Zaranda squeezed her arm and smiled. "Well done."

Stillhawk was on his feet, leaning against the wall. He broke off the shaft in his flesh and threw it down. *Let's go*, the ranger signed.

At the base of the steps a door stood open. They passed through to find themselves in a hemicylindrical chamber of glazed green brick, fifty yards long and maybe seven high. Lamps hung from hooks set high on the curved walls, their light hued purple by aged glass. The reek of sulfur was very strong.

At the far end a door stood open. They ran for it. Echoes of their own footsteps pursued them.

They had almost reached the door when an arrow grazed Zaranda's right ear. She looked back to see men with short bows kneeling at the chamber's other end and Stillhawk lying on his face with a thicket of arrows jutting from his back.

"*Vander!*" she screamed, and halted.

Chen grabbed her arm. "Zaranda, run! You can't help him."

Arrows moaned past Zaranda's face and with musical pings struck the brickwork above and around her. The short bows weren't very powerful, and their trajectory was high; the low ceiling made it difficult to shoot with any accuracy even at this short range.

Stillhawk stirred, rose to his knees, his feet. He turned, took an arrow from his quiver, drew it, and loosed. A bowman screamed and fell with the shaft in his throat even as a blue-and-bronze arrow struck Stillhawk through the thigh.

Zaranda could stay and watch no more. Weeping, she and Chen darted through the door—and halted.

It gave onto a landing perhaps ten feet by ten. Around its edges was open air—a cavern, so huge its ceiling and sides were only hinted at by reflected glints of the red glare cast by a river of molten lava that flowed past the foot of the stairs, a hundred yards below.

Zaranda shook her head. "Lava?" she asked, incredulously. "Who'd expect to find live lava flowing beneath Zazesspur?"

"Look!" Chen called, and pointed. Barely visible for distance, dimness, and eye-watering fumes, the king and Tatrina were running away from them along the lava river.

Without a glance back to where her old friend was conducting what was almost certainly his final stand, Zaranda started down the stairs.

* * * * *

Taking time to aim, Stillhawk shot down three more archers. He was struck four times in return. He backed toward the doorway, hoping to shoot from its cover.

An arrow laid open the right side of his forehead. He reached the door, slipped around and out of the line of fire. At once he discovered that he stood on a tiny platform in a great cavern, and that he was out of arrows.

He plucked one from his breast, nocked it, and swung out into the doorway. Guardsmen ran toward him. He shot the foremost, pulled another arrow from his body. As if to replace it, several more hit him.

He shot two more blue-and-bronzes. The survivors got smart and went to one knee to improve their aim. Hit half a dozen more times, Stillhawk had to lurch back.

His legs were rubbery, head light from loss of blood. Only the pain and his fierce determination not to let Zaranda down kept him alert. He tore yet another arrow from his flesh, nocked it, drew back the string, and swung out into the entryway once more.

A sword whistled right to left and chopped the elven longbow in half.

A small and ugly man confronted him. He had ginger mustachios, bandy legs, and a prominent, fleshy nose. Crackletongue hung in his heavily gloved hand, and the curved blade glowed as if white-hot, signifying the nearness of evil.

Stillhawk dropped the useless halves of his bow and drew his long sword.

"So you're the ranger," the shorter man said in a sneering voice. "You look more like a pincushion to me."

He advanced. Stillhawk backed away slowly, warily, till a foot came down with the heel on emptiness.

"Nowhere left to run," the flamboyantly mustached man said. "Shall we try blades, or will you just jump?"

Giving the ranger no chance to answer, the man thrust at his right eye. Stillhawk's wrist twitched. Long sword caught saber and knocked it aside.

Shaveli Sword-Master raised his eyebrows and took a step back. "Not bad," he said, and pressed the attack again.

He was devilishly quick. Crackletongue darted like a blue-white flame, but Stillhawk, wounded nigh death as he was, knew how to parry by the slightest rolls of his powerful wrist. He kept the crackling blade away from his flesh.

At last Shaveli snarled in exasperation, "Have done! I have no more time for you!" He feinted for Stillhawk's knee, then thrust again for the eyes. When the ranger knocked his blade up, he reached forward, grabbed a handful of the arrows still jutting from Stillhawk's chest, and twisted.

Stillhawk cried out in pain. Shaveli ran him through the heart. For a moment the ranger glared defiance at his tormentor. Then the light went out of his eyes, and his head lolled loose upon his neck.

Gently—so that the larger man would not slip over the edge, carrying the magic blade with him—Shaveli lowered Stillhawk's corpse to the platform. He braced a foot against the ranger's rib cage and pulled his weapon free.

"Friend Shaveli," a familiar voice called from the far side of the door, "bide a moment."

The Sword-Master spun, and his eyes grew wide.

* * * * *

Gasping from exertion and fumes, the two women reached the bottom of the many-switchbacked stair. Lava bubbled almost at their feet. The blazing heat from it seared the exposed skin of the faces and hands.

"There." Chen pointed ahead. Smoke streamers coiled through the air before them, half-visible, making their presence known mostly by the way they stung the eyes. "A little door, perhaps a hundred paces on. It's open."

"You must be able to see in the dark like a gnome," Zaranda said, coughing.

The girl smiled hugely and nodded. "I always do well at night," she said. "Darkness doesn't bother me."

Heat and brimstone made Zaranda's head spin, and her stomach sloshed with nausea. Her legs were as unsteady as dandelion stalks. Raising her boots from the black stone floor, polished to glassy smoothness by unguessable generations of feet, was like trying to lift the planet Glyph, rings and all. Her arms obeyed no less reluctantly, as though she were trying to move underwater—no, through a medium much denser than water. ...

"Zaranda," Chen said, voice rising toward panic. "I can't move!"

Zaranda forced her head around. It felt like trying to turn the head of the famed Fallen Idol, which lay in the river at the bottom of the gorge to which it gave its name.

The monster that called itself Armenides stood on the last switchback, thirty feet above. Its eyes glowed yellow. Its bull head grinned at them despite the hideous smoking gash across the left side of its face. Many of its limbs were cropped or missing, but it seemed in small danger of running out of them.

"Zaranda," it said, "dear Zaranda. Always more presumptuous than wise. Did you really think to pit yourself against the will of L'yafv-Afvonn? *He's* what lies behind that door: the One Below, the Whisperer in Darkness—the nexus of the crisis, and the origin of storms. He is the One who rules the night; he has brought forth the darkling hordes of his own substance. He has made hideous the dreams of the miserable wretches who infest Zazesspur, and soon he shall make their realities even more so. I am as an ant beside his power and malice. And you—you are less than ants to me."

He laughed, and the sound of his laughter filled the cavern and made the lava seethe and pop with redoubled fury. Zaranda fought to move, to fling her sword at him, or even a defiant gesture. But she could no more control her body than she could that of Elminster in his tower half a continent away. She and Chen were trapped inside the monster's will.

* * * * *

Shield of Innocence could not move his legs. That was all right. His arms were more than strong enough to drag him along the floor. And lying on his belly kept his viscera inside. Mostly.

The stink of brimstone tore at nostrils more sensitive than any human's. He ignored it, as he ignored the pain and growing weakness. His small blue eyes

shone with the purity of his purpose.

A shape lay sprawled before him on the tiny square of stone poised above fire and blackness: Stillhawk the ranger, dead.

Shield's eyes brimmed with tears. "O Torm," he gasped, "grant that I have not come too late!"

Gently he lifted the forester's head and cradled it against his ruined breast.

* * * * *

"Well," Armenides said, still in that horribly cheerful voice, "it seems I control the two of you. What shall it amuse me to do?"

Shaveli and nine or ten short-bow-armed guardsmen stood ranked on the stairs above the false Ao priest—well above, for even they feared to approach so monstrous a being. To perfect her misery, Zaranda saw Crackletongue's distinctive blaze sprouting from the Sword-Master's fist. Contact with the magic sword should have inflicted painful injury on a man as devoted to evil as the torturer. Evidently his black leather gauntlets insulated him from harm. He saw her eyes fix on him, stuck out his tongue obscenely far, and wiggled the tip.

"I know," the fiend declared. "I shall make you walk into the lava, one by one. Now, whom shall I do first? Ahh, but of course—the redheaded chit!"

Eyes great, face pale as bleached linen beneath her freckles, Chen turned and took a slow step toward the river of molten stone. "*Randi!*" she moaned through clenched teeth.

* * * * *

Shield of Innocence took the bloodstained amulet from about his neck and laid it on Stillhawk's unmoving breast. "O Torm," he prayed, "O True and Brave, please listen! Your dog begs you, do not let this soul slip out of the world. No one is truer and braver than he, and we have—"

He coughed up blood. "We have not enough hands to fight the evil that waits below. I know ... I have not served you long enough to earn the power to bring him back. And I won't ever, for this day I die, Lord. But please . . . *please* give him back his life, for his sake, for those poor brave women down there, for this whole world."

Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Good Torm, I beg you!"

A shimmer in the stinking air before him. A tiny point of radiance, intolerably bright, expanding to a miniature sun. The brilliance dazzled his light-sensitive eyes, threatened to burn them out, yet it filled his soul with warmth and peace such as he had never known.

Shield of Innocence, a voice said in his mind, who well have justified your name: you alone of mortals on this world have I addressed through all the ages, and you alone shall I so address. Torm hears you, and through Him, I hear.

My name has been taken in vain. You have chosen to redress this evil, knowing what the cost would be. So be it: your wish is granted.

The light flared, expanded, enveloped Shield so that it seemed he would be consumed by it, as by the heart of a sun. Then it went out.

The ranger opened his eyes.

"O Torm!" the orog wept. "O Ao All-Father, I thank you!"

Stillhawk shook his head and moaned softly. *Shield?* he signed.

"I am here. Live now. Your strength is needed."

You are a true paladin, the human signed. *In silent song shall I honor your*

name forever.

Painfully, Stillhawk raised his right hand. The orog's claw engulfed it, and they gripped each other tight. *Zaranda?* the ranger signed.

"Below. She needs your strength. You cannot rest yet."

Shield—

The great orc dragged himself to the precipice edge. Below him, dizzyingly far, he saw the fiend standing triumphant upon the landing—and below that, Chen walking step by excruciating step to her own destruction.

He raised himself on his mighty arms, drew his legs beneath him, forced them to lift his bulk off the stone by sheer will. For a moment, he teetered on the verge.

"Ahh!" cried Stillhawk, unable to make his tongue-less mouth form the word no.

Shield of Innocence spread his arms and dived into emptiness.

"Hmm," the monster said. "There's something strange about this one, something I can't quite put my finger on. Oh—I forgot." He held up a pincer and clacked it. "No fingers anymore. Foolish me."

Chen raised her foot and held it poised above the yellow-glowing lava. A bubble popped. Liquid rock struck the sole and sputtered there, raising a stink of burning leather.

"Care to test the waters first, my child?" the fiend asked. The girl pointed her toe like a dancer. It descended toward the lava.

"Zaranda," the girl said, "I'm sorry I don't have the strength to fight him—" "No!" Zaranda screamed.

Like a vast bat, a shadow swooped down from above. The outflung arm of Shield of Innocence struck the back of Armenides's neck.

"Die, monster!" the orog roared as his hurtling mass swept the fiend from his perch. Both plunged into the lava with a splash of white-hot fluid.

The spell of compulsion broke like a glass jar smashed against a rock. Zaranda lunged forward, grabbed the back of Chen's blouse, and yanked her from the brink. As they sprawled on the stone flagging, yellow-glowing gobbets splattered the place where the girl had stood.

Zaranda picked herself up onto her knees. "Oh, *Shield*," she said. A single tear rolled from her eye.

Zaranda hugged Chen fiercely. The girl lifted her head. Her eyes flew wide. "*Randi!*"

Zaranda's head snapped round. Shaveli jumped lithely down from several steps up and stalked forward. Chenowyn leapt to bar his path, holding her knife both-handed before her.

The Sword-Master twitched Crackletongue back and forth. The blade hummed with energy. "Get her out of my way," he said. "You know what I can do to her."

"Chen," Zaranda said, "no. This is between him and me. You can't fight him."

The girl stepped back and lowered her arms to her sides. Then she drew herself to her full height and took a deep breath. The air around her wavered, and her eyes began to glow red.

"Chen?"

Shaveli cocked an eyebrow at the redhead. "Interesting. Are you trying to muster some magic against me, wench?" He jerked a thumb up over his shoulder. "Not wise."

The half-score of guardsmen aimed drawn bows at Chen from the steps. "Any spell she casts at me," Shaveli told Zaranda, "will make her spring many leaks. Can't you clear the amateurs from underfoot? I'll give you a fighting chance."

"Chenowyn, please," begged Zaranda, who had never seen the girl's eyes actually glow before. "He's right. Whatever wild talent you can muster now will only get you killed without helping me. Stand back and let me dispose of this filth."

Chen's red hair stood up from her neck. Yellow sparks played through it. Then she slumped, and the fires died from her eyes and the lightning from her hair.

She drew back from between the two.

Shaveli laughed. "Bold words from one who so recently submitted to my caresses."

"Don't flatter yourself, Shaveli. A man who has to let a whip do his fondling for him is less than half a man, no matter how big a blade he swings."

Shaveli snarled and thrust forward in a long, liquid lunge. Zaranda danced aside, whipping out long sword and parrying dagger. Shaveli stamped his boot, cried, "Ha!" and aimed a lightning wrist cut at Zaranda's temple. She barely got her own sword in the way; sparks from Crackle tongue's blade showered her, lodged in her hair, and made wisps of stinking smoke.

"A noble blade you carried, Countess," the Sword-Master said. "Too much so for the likes of you."

He flicked the blade at her face. She threw the long sword upward to parry. Crackle tongue whipped round and scored a deep gash transverse down her right thigh.

He came on, magic blade weaving a tracery of light before him. With all her skill and speed, Zaranda managed to keep the stolen blade from her vitals, though it pinked her time and again, making her sword arm run with slippery blood, opening a cut in her right cheek. She was handicapped by the knowledge that she dared not allow Crackle tongue to take her blade edge-on; fine though the weapon Duke Hembreon had lent her was, its steel could not withstand the magic saber's bite.

He maneuvered her until she stood with her back to the lava river. Then he pressed, stamping and shouting, cutting and thrusting. When she felt heat that threatened to burn through the backs of her trouser legs, he feinted high and then slid forward, thrusting for her belly.

Crackle tongue's tip jabbed to within an inch of her skin, but she managed to hack it aside. The shining sword looped around and, with a ringing *clang*, lopped off her blade a handspan from the hilt.

Shaveli saluted her with a flourish of the magic sword. "So, Countess, shall we dance? Or will you take another step back? The lava is kinder, I promise you."

She threw the ruined sword at his face.

He caught it effortlessly with his left hand. She jumped at him, grabbed his sword wrist, and plunged her parrying dagger hilt-deep into his belly.

"Yes," she hissed into his pain-contorted face. "Let's dance."

His lips peeled back from bloody teeth. "The dance has just begun," he gritted. He reached across himself with his left hand, grabbed the wrist of the hand that held the dagger, and forced the blade back out of his body.

Zaranda felt her wrist being turned until the dagger pointed at her own body. She was taller than the Sword-Master, but his strength was greater than hers. Inexorably the dagger point was forced toward her flesh.

Sorceress and swordswoman as she was, Zaranda had found little time in life to study unarmed combat. Still, in her travels, she had gleaned a trick or two from the hand-fighting arts of distant Kozakura.

The dagger tip touched her stomach beneath her breastplate's lower edge. Shaveli smiled a ghastly smile and pushed harder.

In grappling the Sword-Master, Zaranda had moved several feet away from the lava. Now she shifted her left-hand grip from the man's wrist to Crackle tongue's hilt and cast herself onto her back. Her not-inconsiderable

weight drew the Sword-Master along. As he fell onto her, she put a boot in his stomach. Then she pulled with her arms and pushed with her long, strong leg.

Shaveli flew over her head. She twisted Crackletongue from his grasp as he passed. With a despairing wail, he pitched headfirst into the lava.

Zaranda rolled over and sat up. "At last," she said, "you've found yourself a willing embrace."

Something moaned past her ear and went into the lava three feet in front of her. She gasped as molten-stone droplets seared her cheek. The bowmen on the steps above were drawing bead on her.

One screamed and pitched forward off the stair. He landed with a *whump* on the stone beside the lava and lay still. An arrow jutted from his back.

His comrades turned to stare upward. Zaranda's gaze followed. "*Stillhawk!*"

The ranger stood at the top of the stair, legs braced, a short bow in hand. He plucked an arrow from his breast, nocked, drew in one smooth motion, and shot a second guardsman through the forehead.

The blue-and-bronzes cried out in consternation. Some shot back, others forsook bows for blades and ran up the stairs. None had any attention to spare for Zaranda and Chen; shooting with almost elven speed and accuracy, Stillhawk could drop them all unless they found a way to deal with him.

The women ran toward the doorway, piled through it, and came up short.

It was a great round bubble of a cave, ill lit by a smattering of torches in sconces hammered into the rough walls. By the far wall rose a glittering mound of treasure: gems, jewels, golden idols with gemstone eyes, a seeming infinitude of coins—silver, platinum, gold. Lying in the midst of the wealth, as in a nest, was a mass of glistening gray flesh almost thirty feet around.

From the mass protruded things—*beings*. Duergar, drow, orcs, humans—they seemed to grow from the substance of the thing. Some showed as no more than bumps on the surface; others were all but fully formed. Three tentacles, each as thick around as Shield's torso, reared from the obscene bulk, bearing great-toothed jaws. Three eyes mounted on impossibly delicate stalks weaved above the mass.

"What is it?" Chenowyn asked.

"A deepspawn," Zaranda said. "I should have suspected."

Near the mound crouched Tatrina, her eyes red from weeping. Her cheeks bled where her nails had gouged them. She appeared quite bereft of reason.

"Where's Faneuil?" Zaranda asked.

Something erupted from the horror's flank. Zaranda jumped back, raising her weapons defensively—for all the good they'd do against a creature that huge.

Slime sloughed away from the writhing thing. It was the upper half of Faneuil I, king of Tethyr. The head still bore its modest crown.

The man spat filth and craned to look at the newcomers. "Zaranda!" he croaked. "Help me!"

He stiffened. Tension seemed to flow from him. A blissful smile crossed his face.

"Welcome," he said—and his voice was the Voice from Zaranda's dreams, dry as desert wind stirring sand. "I've waited a long time for you, Zaranda Star."

"What in hell are you?" Zaranda asked.

"Not in hell, but in your world. I am lord-to-be of Faerun. I am L'yafv-Afvonn."

Chen wrung her hands convulsively before her breast. "What *is* that thing? What's going on?"

"It's a monster called a deepspawn," Zaranda said. "It loves to feed on intelligent prey. And anything it eats, it can duplicate from its own flesh. A perfect copy of the original in every way—except that it exists only to serve its creator's will."

She shook her head. "I should have seen it before. Here's where the darklings came from. And the All-Friends—those poor children were all replaced by spawn. Except Tatrina."

"She won't remain the exception long," the false Hardisty said. "She'll be very helpful in persuading her self-righteous old fool of a father to accept your authority when you return to the surface. Except, of course, it won't be you at all, but another of my children." The head laughed uproariously.

"What about the king?" Zaranda asked.

"Useless fool. I shan't even bother to duplicate him."

Head and body went rigid again. Then Hardisty said in his own voice, "Kill . . . me."

Zaranda stepped forward. Crackletongue flared and sparked and it lashed out. The king's head sprang from his shoulders and bounced to a stop at her feet.

The mouths hissed. *Fool!* the Voice exploded in her mind.

Two sucker-studded tentacles—as big around as the ones that bore the mouths, but vastly longer—shot from the pile in a spray of treasure to seize Chen and Zaranda. Zaranda felt another magical compulsion try to claim her, but bent all her will to fighting it and felt it pass.

Resist as you will, the Voice said in her mind. *It only adds spice.*

A third tentacle erupted forth. As Zaranda tried to hack at the tentacle that held her, the tip of the other grabbed her wrist and bent it cruelly back. Her fingers went numb; the sword slipped free.

Now I will exact the price of your meddling, the Voice said. *Rejoice that I must assimilate your flesh to replicate you, else your suffering would be protracted indeed.*

From outside the door came a drumming as of giant wings. Then screams, none in Stillhawk's voice.

A guardsman appeared in the doorway. He took three steps forward on wavering legs. In the torchlight, Zaranda saw that his eyes stared between bloody parallel slashes that ran down the front of him from crown to crotch. He fell upon his face.

A woman walked in. Black hair cascaded past slender shoulders and down the back of a midnight-blue gown. Her austere beautiful face bore no expression.

Nyadnar, the Voice hissed. *You have picked a curious mode of suicide.* The free tentacle quested for her.

She raised a hand. "Don't even try. Look into my eyes, L'yafv-Afvonn, gaze upon my true soul. You can never hope to best me."

Never is a long time, mage.

"We'll see."

"Who is this?" asked Chenowyn, squirming fruitlessly to free herself of the

tentacle wrapped about her slim waist. "Are we saved?"

"No," Zaranda said in a leaden voice. "This is Nyadnar. She'll do exactly nothing."

"It is not my way to act directly on the world," the sorceress said. She gestured at the dead guardsman at her feet. "Unless, of course, I'm compelled to defend myself." She walked to the wall opposite where Tatrina crouched, and stood as if carved.

Now, said the Voice, *where were we?* A mouth-arm darted forward and seized Zaranda's feet in its jaws.

* * * * *

"No!" Chenowyn screamed as the horror began to feed her friend into its maw. Zaranda thrashed violently, but was swallowed up, inch by inch.

The girl turned a tear-drenched face to Nyadnar. "You've got to help her!" she pleaded. "Please!"

"That is not my way."

"Let me *go!*" Chen drummed impotent fists on the tentacle that held her. Then to the sorceress: "I've heard her talk about you. You were her friend."

"I have no friends. I can afford none. My responsibilities are too great."

"You *used* her! How can you just let her die?"

"I employed her services from time to time. She was rewarded suitably, even generously. Where she is now, she came to by her own choice."

Slobbering, the toothed jaws had worked their way to Zaranda's hips. "She'll die! You have to do something!"

"I cannot." A pause. "But you can."

"Me? I'm just a girl! What can I do?"

"You are not *just* a girl, Chenowyn," the sorceress said. "As to what you can do ... whatever you choose."

The jaws were about her friend's waist. Zaranda uttered a hawk scream of rage and frustration.

"Damn you!" the girl flared. "Damn you, damn you, damn you! And damn you, too, you great big wad of *filth!*"

Her body went rigid with rage. Her hair rose, and her eyes began to glow. Her lips peeled back from her teeth in a grimace of fury....

And her jaws extended forward, telescoping.

* * * * *

Chenowyn's scream penetrated Zaranda's despair and brought her head around.

Her apprentice was transforming before her eyes. Her skin was darkening toward a brilliant, shiny, red; at the same time it grew visibly thicker, scaly, with an oddly crystalline quality. Face and limbs grew longer, became toothy jaws, forelimbs and legs wickedly clawed. Her skull flattened and broadened, and two long back-curving horns sprouted from its rear. Nubs formed on her back and grew into great ribbed wings.

The deepspawn found itself holding a small but very angry gem dragon. A mouth-arm darted for it, jaws spread wide. The dragon uttered a furious, piercing scream. A spray of brilliant red dust, like rubies ground to sand, gushed from its mouth.

Tough hide and muscle were scoured from the deepspawn's mouth-arm. Skeletonized jaws fell to the floor. The monster drew back a stump gouting green blood.

The dragon-Chen clawed at the tentacle about her waist. What an adolescent girl's fists could not achieve, an adolescent dragon's talons made light of. Ruby talons shredded the tentacle. It let Chen go and jerked away.

Chen's wings exploded from her sides, beat tentatively. She fell on her rump. Rising up on her hind legs, she thrust her head forward and breathed her spray of ruby dust against the neck of the mouth that had worked its way to Zaranda's armpits.

The abrasive spray cut through the arm. The head fell to the floor, jaws working spasmodically. Zaranda began to struggle free.

A tentacle lashed at Chen. Her jaws snapped it through. Then she flung herself at the monster, buffeting it with her wings, lashing it with her tail.

The remaining tentacle snaked out, looped back, wrapped itself around the young dragon's neck. She uttered strangling sounds and beat at it with her wings. It held her up in the air while the surviving mouth-arm trumpeted a cry of triumph.

Zaranda had extricated herself from the still-spasming jaws. Crackletongue lay on the floor nearby. Her right hand would not respond; she snatched the sword up with her left, screamed, "*A star!*" and slashed at the tentacle that was throttling Chenowyn.

With a flash and a crack, a stink of ozone and burned fetid meat, the magic blade cut through the tentacle. The severed end dropped from Chen's neck to writhe on the floor like a snake with a broken back. The stump, spewing foulness, flailed wildly, knocking Zaranda against the wall.

Chenowyn braced her legs, gathered herself, and *breathed*.

Corundum spray enveloped the monster. The spawn-heads growing from it opened wide their eyes. They began to scream in a horrid cacophony of voices.

The bulk heaved and flopped, trying to escape the awful torrent of ruby dust. Its skin abraded away, and then its flesh, and that which served it as bones, and its pulsating inner organs. The sprouting bodies withered to skeletons and went quiet.

A psychic scream burst like a sun exploding inside Zaranda's skull. Consciousness left her.

* * * * *

When she opened her eyes, Nyadnar was standing over her, gazing down with neither curiosity nor compassion.

"Oh," Zaranda groaned. She sat up. She felt like Death on a bender. But she was alive, and nothing seemed broken. "Chenowyn?"

"She is well," the sorceress said, nodding toward the middle of the floor. A very normal-looking human girl lay curled about herself. "Just resting."

"And L'yafv-Afvonn?"

"Destroyed. Or at least, fled to another dimension to avoid dissolution. One from which he cannot return, should he even desire to, for a time longer than the span of your lives, and a dozen generations of your descendants."

The girl moaned, jackknifed. Zaranda was up at once, running to her side, gathering her into her arms.

"What happened?" the girl moaned. "What did I do?"

"I don't know, honey," Zaranda said, "but it sure worked."

"You have saved the balance of the world, which was in danger of being thrown hopelessly awry," Nyadnar said, "You have done well, my daughter."

The others gaped at her. "Yes," the sorceress said, in a tone of voice like none Zaranda had ever heard from her. "You are my child, Chenowyn."

"She's a dragon?" Zaranda demanded. "How could that be? She didn't so much as shimmer in Armenides's dead-magic room; she couldn't have held a polymorph spell. And she's no half-dragon. She's as human as I."

"She is. She is also a dragon—as much as I."

Chenowyn jumped to her feet. "No! It's not true! I'm not a dragon! And stop talking about me like some . . . some *thing* that's not even here!"

Zaranda seized her hand. "Chen, I love you, no matter who you are—and you will never be a *thing* to me. But you *were* a dragon. I saw."

She straightened and faced the sorceress, one arm around the sobbing girl's shoulders. "How can somebody be both fully human and fully dragon? And what kind of dragon? She's not like any I've ever heard of."

"She is a new thing in the world," Nyadnar said, "A thousand years ago I noted an alarming fact: while you humans are small, short-lived, and weak, and we dragons are great, long-lived, and powerful, your numbers were increasing rapidly, year by year, whereas ours diminished slowly, but steadily.

"One solution—bandied about by the council of wyrms more frequently than it would reassure you to know—has been to eradicate your mayfly kind. I opposed this course of action. For one thing, by the time it came up for debate, I was morally certain it was too late—that were we to attempt any such thing, we should succeed only in hastening our own extinction. For another, I perceived your kind as having a function in the great system of the world, even as dragonkind has.

"Yet I could see the two coming inevitably into conflict. I wished to preserve both races if possible. So I sought to see if I could somehow reconcile them. Many years have I spent in study, in contemplation, and in experimentation. The end result you see before you: a person who is both human and dragon. A super-being, if you will: a ruby dragon."

Zaranda frowned. "I've heard that certain evil wizards of the Dalelands created an artificial woman by magic a few years ago. She didn't turn out as expected, if the story's to be believed."

"You speak of the woman who calls herself Alias of Westgate. I have interviewed her. She was indeed a less-than-pleasant surprise to her creators." The sorceress shook her head. "But the cases are nothing similar. There is nothing artificial about Chenowyn. By means beyond your comprehension I quickened her in my womb, carried her for nine months as a human woman, bore her in pain as a human mother."

"And then you just . . . turned her out," Zaranda said.

"When it was clear she was strong and would survive, I left her at the Sunite orphanage in Zazesspur." Nyadnar turned to the girl. "I hope you will understand, my daughter. I had to let you make your own way, to prove that this new order of being was viable. I had to let you show you could survive, though it tore at my heart to do so."

"You mean I'm just an *experiment*?" Chenowyn wailed.

"No, not at all. You are, as I said, an entirely new order of being. Possibly superior to anything that has existed on this plane before. And you are my daughter."

"*Don't call me 'daughter'!*" The girl turned and bolted from the chamber.

Zaranda ran after her. She got out the door in time to see Chen transform

herself into a scarlet-hued dragon and fly upward.

Zaranda looked sidelong at Nyadnar, who stood staring up into the cavern darkness. Her inhumanly beautiful—literally *inhuman*, Zaranda realized—features remained expressionless, but her alabaster hands were knotted into fists.

"Nyadnar," she said gently, "you may've spent a thousand years studying how to give birth to her, but you have a *lot* to learn about being a mother."

Epilogue
A Star

Night had returned to Zazesspur when Zaranda returned to the surface.

A vast crowd thronged the civic plaza. Through the doors of the Palace of Governance, Zaranda emerged, supporting a gravely wounded Stillhawk. Tatrina followed, looking right and left, tentative as a wild animal.

From far back in the crowd, a voice yelled, "All hail Zaranda Star!" The crowd took up the cry in a mighty cheer: "*Hail Zaranda!*"

"I hope that wasn't one of our people," Zaranda said to herself.

Duke Hembreon set a halting foot on the bottommost step of the broad concrete stairs. Tatrina's cornflower-blue eyes went wide.

"Daddy?" she said. Then: "Daddy!" and she went flying down the steps into her father's plate-armored arms.

"All part of the service, folks," Zaranda said. Suddenly she had to sit down on the top step. She managed to ease Stillhawk down to lie beside her. "Can somebody fetch a stretcher? My friend here needs care."

An astonishingly beautiful woman in a low-cut crimson robe came bustling up the steps. She had long white-blonde hair done up in an elaborate gleaming coiffure, and a huge gaudy gold Sune pendant a-dangle between her not-particularly well-concealed breasts. A pair of strapping young men in red tunics followed her.

"We shall personally tend this hero's hurts at the Temple of Sune Firehair," she said, clasping her hands before her bosom. "Ooh, he's so handsome!"

Stillhawk, now altogether unconscious, was gathered up and borne away by the ingenuer acolytes, trailed by the hand-wringing priestess. Well, Zaranda thought, I guess it's no more than he deserves. He's had a rough day. On the long hike up from the Underdark, the ranger had told her of dying and being resurrected by Shield of Innocence.

Having turned his daughter over to a covey of nurses and seen her carried off in a palanquin, Duke Hembreon approached up the steps again. Zaranda reached to her belt.

"Here," she said, flipping the late King Faneuil I's crown to him. "You might be needing that."

Hembreon fielded it without turning a hair. "It could be so."

"What happened while we were gone?"

"A sudden confusion overtook the darklings. They ceased attacking and fell into a listless state in which they were easily overwhelmed." He looked abruptly apprehensive. "You did dispel whatever evil loosed them upon us, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. It got dispelled good and hard. So did the late king, unfortunately."

Hembreon's bushy white brows lowered. "You mean that? You mean to call his death unfortunate?"

"I do. He was a good man. He just got in over his head." So to speak, she thought, and shuttered.

"Some short while after the darklings lost direction," Hembreon went on, "many reliable witnesses claimed to have seen a small dragon, scarlet in color, take wing from the roof of the palace. Some said it was a red dragon; others, including the Lord Inselm Hhune, who himself once slew a red dragon,

said it was no such thing. It has occasioned considerable debate over whether the apparition was a good omen or ill."

"Oh, that was just my apprentice," Zaranda said. "She's definitely a good omen."

The old duke blinked. Behind him Zaranda saw two more elderly noblemen mounting the steps.

"Good even, Countess Morninggold," said the taller, a very distinguished gentleman with a neat gray mustache. "I wonder if we might discuss an important matter with you."

Zaranda gestured toward the crowded plaza. "As long as you don't mind discussing it in front of fifteen thousand people or so."

"Not at all," the nobleman said. "In fact, the more who hear, the better. I am the Lord Inselm Hhune, and this is my friend and associate, the Lord Faunce."

"Honored, my lords," said Zaranda. She made no effort to rise. She wasn't being rude, merely exhausted. "Lord Hhune, is it? Killed a dragon once, didn't you?"

"Indeed. Now, Countess, we have a proposition to make to you."

Lord Faunce, shorter and rounder than Hhune, dropped to one knee before her. "We crave that you do us the honor of agreeing to be crowned queen of Tethyr."

Zaranda swayed. "I beg your pardon?" she said.

"For some time Lord Faunce and I have belonged to a movement dedicated to restoring monarchy to the land of Tethyr," Hhune said.

"Obviously, we had to keep our activities discreet until very recently. We had our reservations—"

"Now more than vindicated," said Faunce.

"—about the former Baron Hardisty, but we felt that restoration of the monarchy was of paramount importance, and so opted not to oppose him. Now, however, we are prepared to offer the crown to you without reservation. Your heroism has saved our land."

"With all due respect, my lords," Zaranda said, "this is crazy. This morning I was a convict under sentence of death; I'm not even supposed to be alive."

"I have already attempted to apologize for that unfortunate turn of events," Hembreon said stiffly.

"That was a gross miscarriage," Faunce said, "and as members emeritus of the city council we add our sincere regrets that it occurred. On the other hand—" his eye twinkled "—the throne might not be considered poor recompense by some."

"Oh, it's more than generous—can you please help me up here?"

Hembreon aided her to her feet. "It's just that I'm having a hard time taking it seriously."

"I assure you—" the duke began.

Zaranda waved a hand at him. "I believe you." She took a few paces away, feeling a need for room.

A small form pushed out of the crowd and knelt on the bottom step. It was Simonne of Gond. "I hope you won't hate me for saying this, Zaranda," she said, "but you'd make a very good queen."

"I know you mean that as a compliment, Simonne, but—"

The spectators nearby took up Simonne's words and made them a chant: "Queen Za-RAN-da! Queen Za-RAN-da!" In a moment it had spread across

the square.

Zaranda held her hands up. "Wait!" she cried. "QUIET!"

The crowd subsided. "Didn't *anybody* listen to what I told the city council when I was being tried by them? You don't need kings or queens. You need to learn to look out for yourselves and one another. If you don't do that, nothing else means anything."

The Zazesspurians looked at each other. The chant began again, slowly at first, rapidly swelling: "Za-RAN-da! Za-RAN-da! Za-RAN-da!"

She shook her head in disgust. Hembreon tapped her on the elbow. She inclined her head toward him.

"If you are not ready to be crowned," he said, "there is no need to rush into anything. But like it or not, you have just been acclaimed ruler of Tethyr." He smiled gravely. "Would it not be wisest to accept your fate with grace?"

"Well, several times today I've met kicking and screaming what I thought was going to be my fate. I guess it can't hurt to try something new." She turned to the crowd and held both hands clasped above her head—an idiot gesture, she thought, as if she had just won a footrace.

"All right!" she cried as the chant subsided. "I'll do it! I'll be your chief executive, or whatever."

The mob cheered rapturously. And then hundreds of hands were pointing skyward, and voices were crying, "Look!" in tones of mingled fear and wonder.

Zaranda looked up. Selune hung overhead, in a state even the most confirmed pessimist would have to acknowledge was past half-full, with her Tears a glowing trail behind her. Against the moon's face a great shape wheeled, winged and dark.

"Don't worry," she called to the crowd. "She's with me."

She turned to Hembreon. "If you'll excuse me, I have some personal business to attend to." He frowned. "If you could find it in you to say a few words—"

Brightening visibly, the old man stepped forward, raising his arms. "Friends, fellow Zazesspurians, countrymen and -women—" he began. The mob booed lustily.

* * * * *

As she reached the top floor, a young man in black police armor called out to her. In a burlap sack, he was carrying something large and round.

"Countess? I'm Constable Watrous. We were sent in a few hours ago to secure the building from looters. We searched the quarters of the false priest Armenides—" His handsome young face went a shade paler. "You wouldn't believe what we found there."

"Oh, yes I would," Zaranda said. "Now, what's on your mind?"

"Well, we found this there." He reached into the sack and lifted up the brazen head. "It, ah, it's been demanding to be brought to you."

"And so I have, and I must say you took your own sweet time about it, boy."

Zaranda sighed. "Hello, Head. It's been a while."

"Well, now that you've dispatched L'yafv-Afvonn back to the depths of hell—my personal thanks, by the way; you can't imagine how trying it was being compelled to speak for that horror—but now that you've established yourself as one of the foremost heroes of the age—of this or any age, and should I say heroine? be that as it may—unquestionably you'll want to learn the secrets I have to offer—"

Zaranda took the head from the youth, putting a hand over its mouth in the process. "Thank you, Constable Watrous. You did a good job." The youngster saluted, looked as if he wanted to say something, then turned and marched briskly away.

"Rmmph!" the head said, so emphatically Zaranda shifted her hand. "That young man clearly admired you. However, if you have a taste for more mature companionship, I can certainly provide—"

"Shut up," Zaranda said, "or I'll march you back down to the catacombs and chuck you in the lava."

* * * * *

The palace roof was flat. It was dotted with low cement blocks of varying sizes, to what purpose Zaranda couldn't imagine. Maybe they were meant to serve as pedestals for statues. They might just as well have been meant to serve some otherworldly evil aims of Amenides' or L'yafv-Afvonn's.

From the noises drifting up off the plaza, a general celebration had broken out below. A familiar slight figure sat on one of the blocks, her back to the stairs. She didn't stir as Zaranda approached.

Chenowyn whipped around when Zaranda laid a hand on her shoulder. She made as if to knock it away, then covered her face.

"Thank you for saving us today," Zaranda said.

"That wasn't me," the girl sobbed. "That was some monster. Some *freak*."

"That was you. You chose to help us. You found a way. *I'm* glad, anyway."

"I hate myself."

Zaranda shook her head. "Don't talk that way about my friend."

"I'm nobody's friend. I'm not even real. I'm just a construct."

"No," Zaranda said, hunkering beside her. "You're Chenowyn. You're a young girl; you're my apprentice; you're somebody I love and don't want to see hurt. And that's all that matters."

Vast wings boomed. Zaranda looked up to see a great draconian shape settling toward them, scales glinting purple in the light of moon above and city below.

The dragon touched down, and then a woman was walking toward them. Zaranda straightened.

"An amethyst dragon? How come you're so obsessed with sapphires?"

"I like sapphires," Nyadnar said. Her perfect features showed the first expression Zaranda had ever seen on them: puzzlement. "Why would I not like sapphires?"

"Well, I'd figure an amethyst dragon would like amethysts, whereas a taste for sapphires would indicate—never mind."

She walked back to where she had discreetly left the brazen head before approaching Chen.

"Here," she said, tossing the artifact to the sorceress. Nyadnar caught the heavy object as if it were a child's rag ball. "Item delivered. You can arrange payment at your convenience; I'll be around. For a while, anyway."

"So you're Nyadnar," the head said. "I've heard a lot about you. And, I must say, now that I get a look at you—"

The sorceress gestured. The head went inert in mid-indelicacy. "That's a good trick," Zaranda said. "Wish I'd known how to do that."

"You will of course be paid," the sorceress said. "But you understand, my commissioning you to bring me the head was merely a pretext, all along, for—"

"

Zaranda shot a meaningful side-glance at Chen. "Maybe we should save that?"

"Oh," said the sorceress, who was also a dragon.

She held out her hands to the girl. "Come with me, Daughter," she said. "Fly with me. You have proven yourself worthy, and more than worthy, to assume your legacy. Now I will teach you who you are, and what you are; I will awaken in you power unimaginable to lesser beings."

Chenowyn stood. "I know who I am, and what I am: Chenowyn, apprentice to Zaranda Star. I chose to awaken my own power, thank you very much. If I have more, I expect to work it out on my own. Now, goodbye."

Nyadnar stared, aghast. "But I'm your mother."

Chenowyn frowned; for an instant her eyes gleamed red. "A mother doesn't demand *proof* of her child!" she cried. She grabbed Zaranda's hand. "There's only one person in the world entitled to call herself my mother: Zaranda. I'm staying with her. You do what you choose."

She started walking toward the stairwell, tugging on Zaranda's hand. "Can we go? I'm hungry."

"Sure, honey. We can do that."

Zaranda looked back at Nyadnar. The sorceress slowly raised her head. To Zaranda's amazement, a perfectly formed amethyst was sliding down one cheek.

"Yes," Nyadnar said, "even dragons cry. And our tears are gemstones."