

SEPTEMBER 2002

# DEEP MAGIC

THE E-ZINE OF HIGH FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION



PUBLISHED BY AMBERLIN

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Website: <http://www.deep-magic.net>

Feedback: [feedback@amberlin.com](mailto:feedback@amberlin.com)

Cover by Igino Giordano  
"Stalker"

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If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to <http://www.deep-magic.net> where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will update our archived issues accordingly. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to [feedback@amberlin.com](mailto:feedback@amberlin.com), and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

The staff at DEEP MAGIC would like to welcome two new members to our volunteer staff: Joel Brown and Melissa Thomas. They have joined the growing staff at Deep Magic. Welcome aboard!

*Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.*

# NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

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September 2002

Welcome back for another issue of DEEP MAGIC.

This is the fourth issue and we are still going strong. Submissions are still trickling in, but as you will notice, we do not have any science fiction short stories this month. We are selective in what we publish and have turned some down, only because we insist on giving our readers the best. This month you will find a brilliant novella, *Mortal Amusement* by Brendon Taylor. Its many riddles will keep you guessing. We also have *The Fatal Chalice*, a fantasy murder-mystery set in Glencoven Castle written by John Lowe. We believe it is never too early to start your children with a good fantasy tale. With this in mind, we bring you a story suited for a younger audience (ages 8-12), Anne Stickel's *Flower Land*.

Also in this issue you will find an interview and article by Cecilia Dart-Thornton, author of the Bitterbynde Trilogy. Her debut novel, *The Ill-Made Mute*, has won critical acclaim, and you will be amazed at how she managed to publish it. Warning: if you get envious quickly, you may want to skip her interview. She was kind enough to create a link to DEEP MAGIC from her official website. We also feature the artistic talents of Igino Giordano and John Shannon.

Thanks to many of you, our readers, for your kind words by e-mail and Message Board. We still encourage you to tell us about your favorite pieces. We cannot yet pay our contributing authors, artists, or staff, and so we depend on the morsels of feedback from you. Try to make it a monthly habit to comment on one thing that you especially enjoyed with each issue. Visit the [Message Board](#) or send us an [e-mail](#) to pass along and we will gladly do it. Send us a question, a pat on the back, or something to let us know how we could improve. Have your friends over to join us.

Our poll this month is a repeat of our first poll. We asked our few subscribers back then (before launching DEEP MAGIC) what they were looking for in an e-zine. Now that you have had several helpings, go back and vote again.

See you next month!

The Editors  
DEEP MAGIC

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## SAFE PLACES FOR MINDS TO WANDER

# LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

As with any publication, we at Deep Magic receive notes from our readers from time to time. Some of them are so nice that we couldn't resist printing them. If you ever have a comment, good or bad, about Deep Magic, please [send us an email](#) or drop by the [Message Boards](#). We'd love to hear from you!

To the editors,

I've seen a lot of e-zines, and few come close to the quality of this one. I'm referring to your beautiful artwork, your wonderfully varied reading selections, your devotion to Fantasy literature in particular, and especially to your mission statement.

"A Safe Place For Minds to Wander" says so much.

Although I don't consider myself a prude, I do sometimes want to read something "clean," just for the enjoyment of it, knowing the writer has striven toward excellence in the craft, rather than falling back on gender stereotypes and other "fillers."

And, as a middle-school teacher, I know I can safely recommend this site to my Fantasy-fascinated students without fear. This pleases me even more than my enjoyment of the publication. Thanks again.

*Reply: Had to pass around the Kleenex to the staff...made us all get teary-eyed. Many of the editors got started in the genre while in middle school. Wish we had had you as a teacher back then! Thanks for your kind words.*

To the editors,

Thank you for providing a magazine like this to the public. I especially appreciate your "safe haven" approach.

The artwork is gorgeous, and the stories are wonderful. I have always been a sci-fi fan, but your magazine has shown me that the world of fantasy is just as beautiful. I hope that Deep Magic will remain available for a long time to come.

*Reply: we're mostly fantasy fans ourselves but we like a good sci-fi if it's done well. Thanks for your kind words. We also hope that DEEP MAGIC will be available for a long time to come. Wouldn't it be neat if one of the stories went on to win a Nebula someday? Wishing...dreaming...hoping...*

To the editors,

I have really been enjoying your e-zine. Keep them coming! It is a very well done product and has me looking forward each month to more.

I've got a recommendation. You need a comic strip section. I'd suggest you have people submit comic strips (fantasy & science fiction genre) and then choose the best ones to publish. That way you can tap into another talent that some of your readers may possess. You may even go so far as to have another section for jokes with entries like, "Why did the Dread Pirate Roberts cross the road? To get to the princess bride." I just made that up. ;-)

**So, in response to the comment above, which we liked, we thought we'd offer a publishing opportunity for any aspiring cartoonists. Do you have a fantasy or science fiction comic strip you'd like to try out? Deep Magic is now taking submissions. [Just e-mail it to us](#), and if we like what we see, you're in!**

## Editors note:

We were surprised there were no strong letters for Mr. Whitted as a result of his article relating to fantasy movies... until we learned that a problem with the email link prevented our receipt of most responses. If you had words of criticism or praise for Mr. Whitted, please re-send them to [jwhitted@amberlin.com](mailto:jwhitted@amberlin.com), and we promise to publish the most insightful comments in October's issue. [Download Issue 3](#) if you would like to take another look at Mr. Whitted's article.

## POLL: DEEP MAGIC CONTENT INQUIRY

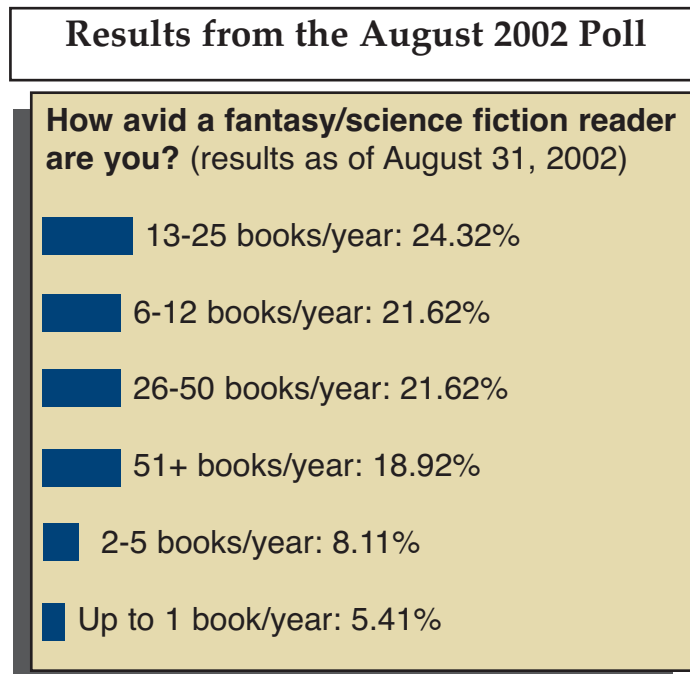
**Content Poll**

**What is the most important part of the e-zine to you?**

- cool artwork
- articles for improving your writing
- science fiction novels
- fantasy novels
- science fiction short stories
- fantasy short stories
- other articles (reviews, interviews, etc.)

As mentioned in the Editor's Note, this is the same poll we ran before the first issue of Deep Magic was published. Now that you have had a few issues to peruse/devour/keep it under your pillow, we would like to know what you have enjoyed most about the e-zine thus far. We take your feedback seriously and hope to use the information this poll yields to improve our product. Thank you for taking the time to vote.

To take the poll, click on the poll box above.



## WRITING CHALLENGE

Our August writing challenge is in the books. We received a number of very creative submissions. But, as always, we couldn't print them all. Our panel of editors made the picks for which submissions to publish. Below you will find a list of the top selections, with links to what they wrote. We hope you enjoy them. As for next month, we want more submissions. Send your writing challenge submission to [writingchallenge@amberlin.com](mailto:writingchallenge@amberlin.com). We will post the top selections next month. In the meantime, here are the August 2002 writing challenge top selections:

[The Storyteller](#) by Lynn-Marie Braley

[Enter Thomas](#) by Matt Mansfield

[The Cloud Princess](#) by Anne Stickel

### September 2002 Challenge

Create a unique "scary creature" by description or in a descriptive scene. Fantasy and science fiction often cross lines with other traditional genres: horror, mystery and romance. This challenge asks you to create a little spot of darkness in your otherwise fantasy/sci fi setting. Scare us with your originality.

August 2002 Writing Challenge: This is an exercise to practice and improve character development. Your task is to describe an original main character in 250 to 500 words. The character can be male or female. Choose whatever setting you like; but the goal is to give the reader a sense of this character. Here is the twist to the challenge: You cannot start two sentences with the pronouns "he" or "she" in the submission (e.g. "He was a lusty looking fellow with gray eyes and a tattoo on his cheek. He a wore a loose-fitting..." this would be disqualified because two sentences begin with the pronoun 'He'). Remember, no two sentences can start with the same pronoun. We are also enforcing a rule that should always be followed unless you are compelled with the threat of imminent violence to violate it: you cannot use the device of a mirror (the character looks in the mirror at his/her own reflection and describes himself or herself). As always, be creative.

## WRITING CHALLENGE SELECTIONS

### THE STORYTELLER BY LYNN-MARIE BRALEY

As his voice faded into the twilight, he watched the wonder on the children's faces fade as well. It always saddened him to see the change in their eyes after he finished a story. Most of the children were poor, their ragged clothes smudged with dirt, and their faces filled with hunger. The children left, but one girl stayed.

"Are your stories true?" she asked.

The question was a test. He could see it in her eyes, in the set of her mouth. How had she known? His stories were fantasies spun in the web of his mind. His greatest fear was that one day he would run out of stories to tell. Even now, the hourglass was beginning to sift through those remaining grains of stories.

The Storyteller shook his head, ashamed of his admission. Traveling was his only means of refilling the hourglass. Rumors, old wives' tales, all served as seeds for his stories. But he was getting old, and his weary bones would no longer allow him to continue his quest. With a grimace, he stood, pulling at his wiry beard. Somehow, his beard retained its youthful midnight black while the hair on his head had gone white as lambswool.

"No!" Her dark hair bounced around her face as she shook her head. "You do not understand, Storyteller! Have you not heard what happens when you tell a story for the first time?"

The flame in her eyes told him that she had many stories to tell. Perhaps one day she would become a storyteller herself. The Storyteller wondered at her parentage. "I have not."

"The story you have told becomes true, because that story springs into being somewhere. Not always here on Earth, but somewhere..."

"And how do you know this?"

Another shake of her head and another cryptic answer. "I just know."

Such determination in those young eyes! With a start, he saw himself so many years ago. The same unrelenting belief in the power of a story, the same certainty that others should believe. And he began to laugh. A laugh that poured from his soul, cleansing him of his hopelessness. For the girl had shown him what he had forgotten, and it sent a wave of joy through him. When he stopped laughing, he noticed the girl watching him expectantly.

"Who are you, child?"

"The daughter of the king. Will you come with me?"

The Storyteller smiled down at her. "I will."

The girl tugged on his hand with childlike enthusiasm. "Come then! You will have a new name! Creator of Legends!"

As he followed her, the name whirled through his mind. Its very sound filled the hourglass in his mind. Already, he felt the overflow of ideas, of wonderfully strange places, of characters pushing to be free.

At the palace gate, the girl stopped, her manner reverent as she gazed up at him. Her voice was soft when she spoke. "And I will help you create your stories."

## ENTER THOMAS BY MATT MANSFIELD

The bright lights above the bar entrance struck the gray of Thomas' kilt with a strong, glowing aura that made the eyes water and drift to less offending areas of his body. A linen shirt, crisp white in the doorway's lighting, framed an upper body made hard by action and a lifetime with a sword in the hand. If eyes continued upward, they'd find a peppered-gray red goatee surrounding a mouth like a razor, drawn tight in a disapproving frown. Above the long, pointed nose, the startling green eyes did not reflect that frown. In fact, they gave nothing away. Atop his head, a closely cropped bush of the gray-peppered red hair reached in all directions.

Leaving the bright light of the doorway, Thomas headed towards the bar. Two couples scrambled out through the door behind his back and a frightened thin man hurriedly excused himself from his date and ran to the bathroom.

While watching him walk, three people were reminded of cats, nine of dancers and one of a lover they'd had when they were 17. His motions were swift, but controlled as he drew up to a barstool and seated himself in front of the mirrored bar. Those who were daring enough could see in the mirror that he was naked under the kilt, as was the style he had set among those bravos who followed him.

"H-h-help you sir?" asked the bartender, visibly shaken by the man's presence.

"Blood brandy," was the reply. A shock of nervous whispers ran around the room. It was well known, in fact bragged about by his bravos, that Thomas always drank blood brandy before he killed.

It was all the bartender could do to pour and place the blood brandy in front of him. The red liquid sloshed in the glass in response to the bartender's continued shaking and hurried placement. Slowly, it settled and, once it was still, Thomas reached out and lifted the glass high where it sparkled like a deeply colored ruby.

"For Mirabelle," he whispered to himself. With a quick motion, he drank the contents of the glass and replaced it on the bar. Every eye in the bar watched as a sad look passed over his face, only to be replaced by the frown a moment later.

The room tensed, fearful of his next move. A man in the corner wet himself; another held his hyperventilating wife. As Thomas stood, the tension heightened to a fevered pitch and when he turned, the crowd bolted like rabbits, heading towards any open exit. Slowly, deliberately, he turned and headed towards his quarry.



## CLOUD PRINCESS BY ANNE STICKEL

Now that the Princess of Cloud Kingdom had come of age, her royal mother was always telling Amitra what was proper and expected. In order to attract the right suitor, a girl must become a lady. A lady knew how to sit, stand, walk and dress, how to speak softly and chew slowly when nibbling dainty morsels. Childish sweat must be scoured away by handmaidens in baths scented with rose petals, until the golden glow of sun-blessed skin became the pale amber of indoor confinement.

Amitra liked herself just as she was -- an ordinary girl, who happened to be able to play alone among the clouds. To stand upon the night clouds, enjoying their misty kisses, while their breathing lifted the long black tendrils of her hair, made her feel alive and free. Often, she sang to the moon out of sheer joy. No suitor could ever match cloud enchantment.

Of all her earthbound playmates, tall, thin Amitra was the most awkward, the slowest and the one who laughed loudest. When they tried to teach her to swim, she nearly drowned. But their royal chum was so clever in inventing new games that Cloud Castle's children accepted her as one of them. Besides, wooed by Amitra's flattery, Cook Lan had shared her secret cloud cookie recipe. The young princess baked them as bribes; cookies coaxed reluctant Tutor Borl to let her leave studies early, and earned her a welcome in the children's circle.

Although included in her companions' games, Amitra held close the precious secret of her cloud dancing. Instead, she poured forth the treasure of stories clouds had whispered in her ear. Entertained for hours, her friends would lie back on the grass together in the warm sun, imagining the clouds as fantastic animals. On cool evenings, they scrambled for the cozy comfort of furs before the Great Hall's warm hearth. The fire's crackle was music. Smoke seemed to form the mysterious and wondrous characters in Amitra's tales. The embers winked like dragons' eyes.



Ladies, however, weren't supposed to tell stories or dance on clouds, getting their finery soaked in mist. Handmaidens bound Amitra's hair high upon her head, and took away her simple child's shifts. Their cruel, muffled giggles made her want to cry. Jewels replaced the flowers in her hair. Layers of perfumed garments barely let her rise to bow to representatives of royalty come to seek her hand. Going barefoot was forbidden; tight shoes pinched Amitra's feet as she practiced dancing with her tutor, under the Cloud Queen's critical eye. Sometimes, the Cloud King inspected Amitra's progress. Even though he smiled gentle approval, his daughter caught the sadness in his dark brown eyes. Amitra's eyes, so like his, reflected the magic inherited from one who was once a cloud dancer, and who still sang sweetly to the moon.

## MORTAL AMUSEMENT



BY BRENDON TAYLOR

One early autumn day, a scroll was tacked to the front door of the Golden Herring Inn. It was a beautiful, golden-flecked parchment that would have cost more than a goat to buy in one of the big cities down south. The writing was elegant in flowing golden ink and slanted a little to the right. Yet, the inn where it hung was less than elegant. Heavy snows from the previous winter left the front in a stooping sag, which had been propped up and patched with old barnwood. Still, the inn withstood the droves of people who came to see the scroll.

Those who could read were crowded by masses of people who could not and were implored to retell what was written. Fortunately, the message was short and simple.



*Offered for your consideration: The opportunity to speak with a God and receive an answer to any one question of your choosing. Meet in the Golden Square on Autumn Solstice to be selected for a test of worthiness to converse with a God.*



The posting of the scroll set into motion the wheels of gossip at such speed as to break all records for spreading the length and breadth of the Brandyspring Valley. Even the long-bearded Artuch Spade had to admit that he had not seen such fervor in any of his seventy-eight years. Many people thought the posting was a joke. Others thought it was a gimmick by Golden Verrick to draw business to the Herring. If it was, it worked. The days leading up to the solstice brought people from the far ends of the valley to see the scroll for themselves, and most patronized the Herring, drinking tall tankards of Mott Ale and bantering over the question each would asked if selected. Soon, men and women from other cities and regions trickled into the valley. The inns of the small farming hamlet were overflowing and began selling space on the common-room floors to accommodate the crowds. With Autumn Solstice less than a week away, the biggest concern in the valley was whether the ale, wine, mead, and food would last through the celebration. To meet this concern, couriers and traders were sent beyond the valley to retrieve supplies from wherever they could be found.

\* \* \*

It had been seven years since the lean trader known as Craden Rhean lost his soul. Craden was not the name his mother gave him, but the one he had taken and used in the years after the event that changed his life. Since then, he moved from town to town, spending his days and nights in one tavern after another, and trying to lose his memory in strong whiskey and rum. His black hair became infused with gray, lengthened and matted in rough clumps.

[Click here to continue on page 27](#)



## IGINO GIORDANO

**Age:** 20

**Residence:** Hamburg/Germany

**Marital Status:** Single

**Children:** no

**Hobbies:** no

**Personal Quote:** "Do not quote quoters"

**Favourite Book or Author:** Herbert W. Franke (German);  
Christopher Welsh (English author)

**Started Painting In:** 1998

**Artist Most Inspired By:** I honestly don't know. They are far too many ...

**Mediums You Work In:** Oils, acrylics, watercolors, gouache, tempera, colored inks, black ink, markers, colored pencils, pencils, graphite, charcoal, pastel chalks, digital, mixed media.

**Educational/Training Background:** Graphic design

**Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed:** My work has been published in countless online galleries and e-magazines, the game industry (CCG), on CD-covers and in the advertising field.

**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally:** Just visit [www.igino.net](http://www.igino.net) and drop me a line.

**Website URL:** [www.igino.net](http://www.igino.net)

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**

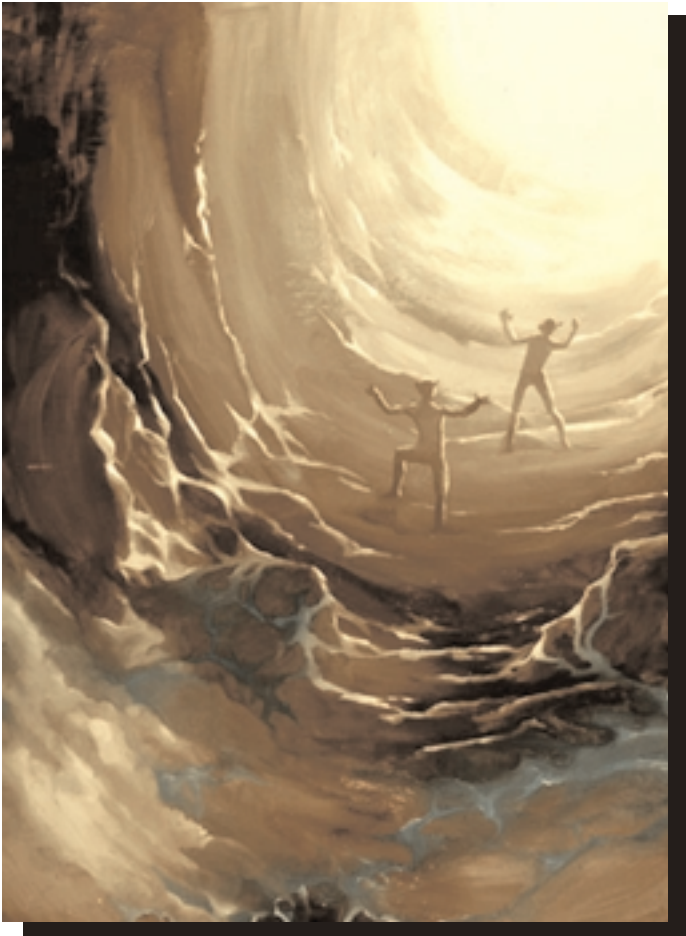
A: Me, an artist? Actually, I never considered myself as an artist. Anyway, most people seem to, so here's my story: I was six when I first discovered that there was something wrong with me. It was in the supermarket while my older brother Steven was away for a minute. A boy at my age started to talk to me:

"Hey," he said, "what's that for?" and pointed to the second index finger of my right hand.

"That's my second index finger," I answered, a little confused.

"How come? I've just got one!" the boy almost shouted.

"Really?" Now I was even more irritated. "Then you are not quite normal!" I said and crossed my arms. Unfortunately, I had to discover that I was the one who was not normal. Luckily, a second index finger is not only a bad thing. I finally found out that it actually helps a lot to gain more control over thin, long things – like pencils.



energy. These moments are remarkable for me. When I paint a fantasy piece, my ambition is to create something equivalent to this feeling.

**Q: What inspired this piece? (The cover art)**

A: I'm a big admirer of the beautiful landscape near where I live. And I love Fantasy-RPGs. At the time when I started to work on "Stalker," my friends and I were often playing those Pen&Paper games in the meadows. This painting very much reflects my mood at the time we had those sessions.

**Q: What do you consider your influences?**

A: Hmm, let me think. Well, I think I'd have to be very selective to give you a precise answer, so I'd better refuse. Is there anything that doesn't influence me? Probably not.

**Q: How would you describe your work?**

A: Colorful dirt that covers clean boards. Seriously? I guess my work is developing. It started somewhere, and it's still going on. It's a steady process.

**Q: Where do you find your inspiration?**

A: This depends on the subject matter. There are two situations when I get the strongest inspiration: When I read the newspapers and when I go hiking. The newspapers are my strongest source for inspiration for SciFi-related artwork. I get a wired feeling in my stomach – some sort of nausea. When I'm creating SciFi artwork, I try to express these feelings with color, contrast and shape. The mountains, the forest and the meadows are my inspiration for medieval or fantasy-related works. Every time I stand in knee-high grass, surrounded by thousands of different animals and plants, and the sun shines on my head, I feel full of



**Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**

A: A certain ambition that allows me to still be receptive.

**Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?**

A: The fantasy genre hasn't changed a lot, I think. Although the subject matter seems to be consistent, the character of the protagonists became modernised. Nowadays, the classic, brave hero almost died out. He doesn't match with the hedonistic mentality of our schizophrenic society. Individualism has become the battle cry of modern knights - the cooler, the better.

SciFi is relative new, on the other hand. I think this genre never really stabilized on one certain position. Every new book, every movie that comes out can surprise with very different aspects and ideas. The only thing all of them seem to have in common is a gift that allows them to show our current mental state. For me, it's fascinating and frightening at the same time.



# THE INFLUENCE OF FOLKLORE ON MY WRITING

## BY CECILIA DART-THORNTON

MY MAIN AIM, WHEN USING TIME-HONOURED TALES BORN OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT AS A RESOURCE, IS TO RETAIN THEIR PURITY. THEIR PURITY IS THEIR PUNCH. THESE ARE STORIES WHOSE GRIP ON THE HUMAN PSYCHE IS SO POWERFUL THAT THEY HAVE ENDURED THROUGHOUT MANY LIVES OF MEN. THEY HAVE BECOME IMMORTAL; BORN LONG AGO WHEN HUMANKIND LIVED CLOSER TO NATURE, PASSED DOWN VERBALLY THROUGH THE GENERATIONS AND FINALLY CRYSTALLIZED IN WRITTEN FORM.

There is a strong natural tendency for writers to humanize and contemporize the creatures of myth and legend. In so doing, their integrity is instantly destroyed and their original power is forfeit. "Faeries" in their primeval form share some characteristics with humans of the third millennium, but certainly not all. For example, a drowner, when cheated of her prey, does not rant in anger and frustration. She merely rises out of the water and states (in rhyme, and quite prosaically), that if she had successfully lured her victim into the water she would have drunk his heart's blood.

Evil faeries, or "unseelie wights," do not assail humankind by grouping together in organised armies. They act in small groups or alone. There are unbreakable laws governing the ways in which they can assail and harass us; for example, most of them are unable to cross a threshold unless invited, and if we do not show fear their power over us is diminished or cancelled.

Much of their behaviour is inexplicable in human terms, except by saying it is the stuff of dreams and nightmare. Why should a thing called a "Shock", resembling a donkey's head with a smooth velvet hide, suddenly be found hanging on a gate? And why, when a man tries to grab it, should it turn around, snap at his hand and vanish? The Shock's purpose seems mystifying, but the event has a 'rightness' to it; as if we know, deep down, by something akin to racial memory, or some kind of shared consciousness, or memories of childhood fancies, that a Shock is a thing we might have glimpsed before, and that this is the kind of thing a Shock would do. At the same time we feel a thrill of fear and fascination. The story of the Shock illustrates how inexplicable the world is, and hints at how many weird, unpredictable creatures infest it.

When weaving the old tales into my own narrative I go to great lengths to preserve this sense of weirdness and unpredictability. I also want to convey the feeling that faerie creatures are permeating the landscape, that my alternative world is teeming with them; that they are, as one reviewer has so succinctly put it, "part of the ecology." They *are*, in a way, part of the ecology, being invariably attached to some element of nature such as water, subterranean caverns, flora and fauna.

Regarding the actual mechanics of entwining fairy-tales with my stories; I find that the best way is to plunge into the fairy-tales and study them until they become part of my subconscious. Then, as the main narrative proceeds, the tales emerge to the forefront of conscious thought at the right moment.

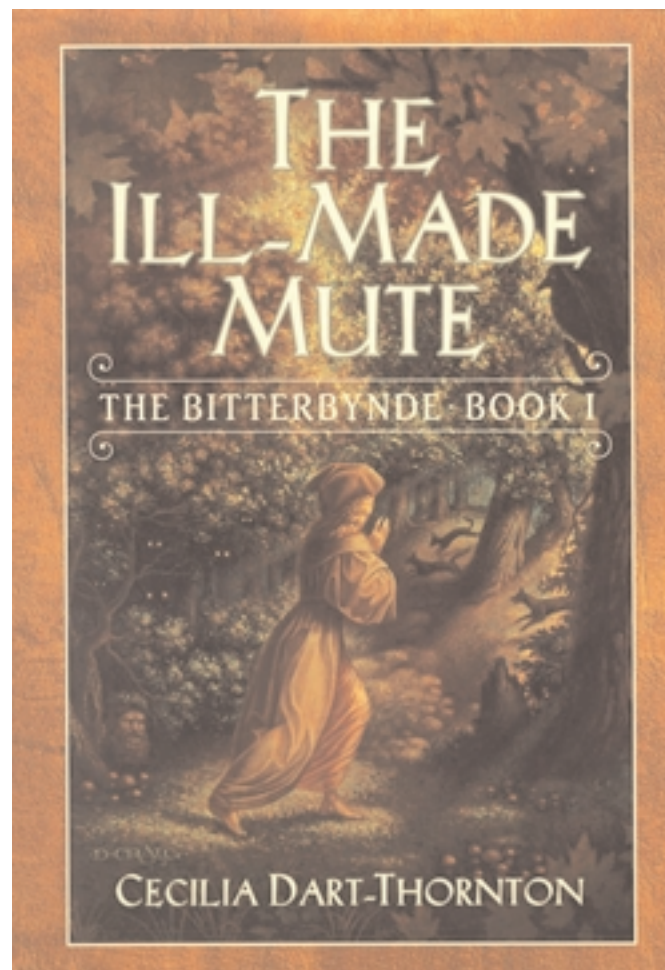
There is a strong natural tendency for writers to humanize and contemporize the creatures of myth and legend. In so doing, their integrity is instantly destroyed and their original power is forfeit.

It is always a delight to bring the old tales out of dusty, archival retirement into the light of the 21st century.

Before I started writing *THE ILL-MADE MUTE*, I had, for several years, been interested in the folklore of the British Isles. My reading in the area was extensive. Gradually I came to understand that the world I wanted to write about was rife with the supernatural denizens of British Folklore. By B.F. I mean the genuine, oral traditions of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The term "Celtic" refers, geographically, to Scotland, Ireland and Brittany. (Does it also refer to Wales, or is that 'Cymric'?) I'm under the impression that strictly speaking, Celtic legend refers to such famous, tragic and bloody sagas as "Cuchulain", "The Red Hand of Ulster" and "The Cattle Raid of Cooley" (Tain Bo Cuailnge). The folklore in which I am immersed does not in any way touch upon those legends. Rather, it pivots around the everyday beliefs originating in ancient rural communities throughout the British Isles. England is not 'Celtic', but much wonderful folklore originates in English localities like Somerset, Cornwall and the Midlands. I suppose one might call these mingled and often overlapping lore-traditions "Anglo-Celtic." ("Gaelo-Anglian"? "Celti-Angloid"?)

All the "wights" in *THE BITTERBYNDE* trilogy are drawn from the pages of authentic folk records.



## INTERVIEW WITH CECILIA DART-THORNTON

**Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?**

The Internet has been a crucial element in my writing career, affecting more than just my relationship with readers and publishers.

For a start, it provides a valuable research tool. Secondly, I can find the out-of-print folklore books I want by searching the vast stocks of online bookstores. Third, it allowed me to join an Online Writer's Workshop. The one I joined was run by Del Rey, the well-known Science Fiction and Fantasy publisher. Being a member of this workshop ultimately led to Warner Aspect's publication of THE ILL-MADE MUTE, Book #1 of the Bitterbynde trilogy. Fourth, without email I would be up half the night talking on the phone to my editors, publicist and literary agent on the other side of the world. Or else I'd be paying a fortune for fax paper, or carrier pigeons, whatever. Fifth, I can communicate with people like you, who have wonderful web sites devoted to High Fantasy. Finally, my own website, <http://www.dartthornton.com>, with its message boards, newsletter, email, polls and other interactive resources, allows me to stay in touch with my readers. It also allows my readers to keep up-to-date with the literate side of my life, letting them know appearance and tour dates etc.

The Internet has been a boon to me!

**Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published.**

I took about twelve years to write the trilogy THE BITTERBYNDE, after which I had lost all objectivity and had no idea whether it was any good. Rather than send it to a publisher and risk the sudden death of a rejection letter, I posted the first half of the first chapter on the Internet website, a U.S. based online writing workshop (it was originally mentored by Del Rey). The positive feedback was overwhelming, and one of the workshop administrators e-mailed me with details of a U.S. literary agent. The agent submitted the manuscript of THE ILL-MADE MUTE to the book publishing division of media giant Time Warner. Within days Warner closed the deal, buying all three books in the trilogy. What's more, this is the first time ever they have published a new author in hardcover!

\* \* \*

Ms. Dart-Thornton is grateful to readers who review the Bitterbynde at

[http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/044652803X/qid=1022022634/sr=1-1/ref=sr\\_1\\_1/103-9783663-7454249](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/044652803X/qid=1022022634/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/103-9783663-7454249) or

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/044652803X/ref=pd\\_bxgy\\_img\\_2\\_cp/026-1404826-3251667](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/044652803X/ref=pd_bxgy_img_2_cp/026-1404826-3251667)

Join the Dart-Thornton Mailing List at

<http://members.optushome.com.au/neptune7/subscripg.html>

The Official Website of Cecilia Dart-Thornton can be found at

<http://www.dartthornton.com>



# THE FATAL CHALICE

BY JOHN LOWE

My name is Derrin, but that hardly matters. I'm not writing to boast about what I've done, but to perhaps explain something. My mentor, the wizard Ecthor, has told me countless times that the only purpose in telling a story is to simply state a truth or teach a lesson. I'm not much of a tale spinner like my mentor, but the reason for telling this story seems to be far more important than any shortcomings in my writing. Perhaps I want to record the deeds of others, both good and bad, for the teaching of future generations. Let me see now, where should I begin? My mentor looks on without much help forthcoming except a dry comment to start at the beginning. Funny that he should be of so little help, especially since this story concerns his arrest for the murder of Lord Henry of Glencoven Castle. Very well, we'll start at the beginning.

The day of the murder began like any other day. I woke to the sound of my mentor calling my name just before the sun had risen in the cloud-filled sky. I jumped out of bed, splashed some cold water on my face, and only paused for a moment at the window. It looked like heavy rain was coming our way. Just beyond the horizon, I could see a wave of dark clouds rolling in. Judging by the strength of breeze in the air, I figured we would be eating our midday meal inside. I was disappointed. As spring was turning the corner to summer, my mentor, Ecthor, had started a regular ritual of eating outside in the warming weather. Three straight days of drizzle preceded this one, but I had smelled a hint of summer fragrance on the air the night before. Obviously someone had decided to forestall the sun for one more day, much to my chagrin.

**The day of the murder began like any other day...**

My mentor called me again, and I was forced to run to his quarters. He knew I had been gazing out the windows, and by the disgusted look on his face I knew he had too. He was poring over a book again, with a suspended orb of light hanging just above his head. It was a flaming ball of white luminescence, and I remembered with pleasure the day I learned that simple spell. It was one of the first, and my mentor had made a big deal of it then. The scene was like that of a parent praising a little child when he has done something we as adults consider simple, but was a great step for the child. Right then, though, the ball was shedding its light in such a way that Ecthor's hair seemed to glow white, though it was really coal-stone black.

"Terrible weather," he said without looking up. "I had thought we could walk by the lake this afternoon, but so much for the well-laid plans of man."

"It might clear up," I said, though I knew the chances were slim. "And if it doesn't, you could always tell us another one of your stories."

"Or we could all stay in bed till the morning is gone," he replied with a sly grin, closing the book carefully. It was well worn around its leather binding, and I could not recall seeing it before. On its cover was set a single, beautiful blue crystal. It was round and glittered from its many facets. "Besides, you and the lord's children have better things to do than sit and listen to the old ones tell stories."

"You are not that old, sir," I said. My mentor has always had this idea that he is much older

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## COPY THAT: COPYRIGHT ISSUES IN FICTION BY BRENDON TAYLOR

A few years ago, a struggling British author (you may have heard of her) wrote a few books and was fortunate enough to land a publishing contract for them. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* earned an enormous following in England and made its way into American pop culture in 1999. Once the lightning bolt scarred, bespectacled young hero became a cultural icon in the states, and Ms. Rowling's book releases drew lines of costumed fans, a certain struggling American author became aware of similarities between the vaunted Harry Potter series, including its characters and themes, and scenes in her own writing, which was published back in the 1980's. Nancy Stouffer contacted Ms. Rowling's American publishers, Scholastic, on August 31, 1999 and followed up her meeting with a letter and copies of documents in support of her contention that the Harry Potter books infringed upon her rights. Enter the lawyers...

Okay, a few quick disclaimers are in order. If you haven't committed our staff biography page to memory (and shame on you if you have not), I should disclose that I am an attorney. However, I spend but a sliver of my professional time practicing in the area of copyright and trademark law. This article is written with general legal principles in mind and should provide a framework of issues, laws, and liabilities that may affect writers or be interesting to non-writers. If I have not already lost you, let's get this party started. (Did I just infringe Pink's copyright?)

**Why would a writer worry about copyright issues? Because we are always receptive to ideas that inspire stories, characters, places, etc.**

Why would a writer worry about copyright issues? Because we are always receptive to ideas that inspire stories, characters, places, etc. Some of these ideas are inspired by sources that are owned by other individuals or companies and if our ideas are too similar to our sources of inspiration, we tread on dangerous ground. We risk copyright infringement and all of the nasty penalties, damages, and ritualistic human sacrifices that go with it. I will spend a little time at the end of this article talking about those penalties and damages (alright, I made up the part about human sacrifices), but the primary focus of this article will be to explain what you can and cannot do as an author, and where other people have gotten in copyright trouble in the past.

The intent of copyright legislation is to encourage the creation and distribution of creative and original works of authorship and provide protection to the creators of such works. A holder of a copyright has the right to reproduce, derive other works from, distribute, perform, and publicly display her work. Surely, we honorable writers would not think of reproducing (copying) another's work verbatim and claim ownership of it ourselves, right?

In August, I perused several submissions at an online writing workshop and noticed a glaring illustration of unauthorized reproduction of a copyrighted work. To protect the innocent, I'll call this author Rupert. What Rupert had done was submitted a work that included passages (word-for-word) from a novel Rupert claimed to have read years earlier. After a reviewer pointed out this plagiaristic problem, Rupert thanked the reviewer and explained that his mind operated like a crow (or some other bird) that finds and stores shiny, but useless, objects. I have no reason to doubt that Rupert was innocent of an intentional copyright violation, but under the law, intent is irrelevant. If

you claim ownership of a work that includes copied passages from another author's protected work, you have violated that person's copyright.

Generally, most writers will not try to pass off passages from another's work as their own, and most of us do not have the kind of mind that will store such passages like the clipboard on this Word™ document. We should be more concerned with recycled ideas or characters that are too similar to those copyrighted sources of inspiration I mentioned above.

What if my source of inspiration is only a small part of a novel or song... maybe just a character? The widely accepted copyright rules extend separate protection to fictitious characters in addition to the protection afforded the work from which the characters derive. This individual protection becomes more secure if the characters are clearly delineated, described, and developed. Ah, so a very-well-developed character, such as Gandalf or Bilbo Baggins would be protected, right? Right. What about that Harry Potter infringement mentioned at the start? I am glad you asked, and I will get to that shortly.

What about less-well-developed characters? The test for whether a copyright has been violated is the "substantial similarity" test. This is also the test that would be applied in the Harry Potter case. The test involves an evaluation from the standpoint of an average member of the intended audience. In the case of literature, there are two types of similarity evaluations: literal and non-literal. Literal is copying and nonliteral is the similarity of the underlying structure or arrangement of the work. For the purpose of finding a copyright infringement, a checklist has been established by American courts to determine whether a substantial similarity exists from one literary work to another. *See* 18 Am. Jur. 2d Copyright and Literary Property § 207, *Substantial Similarities*, by Irwin J. Schiffres, J.D. (May 2002).

The following is a list of facts and circumstances tending to show that a particular combination and arrangement of literary components found in defendant's novel were substantially and materially copied from plaintiff's novel:

- similar or identical stories
- subject matter
- similar or identical themes
- same underlying idea or truth that gives direction and purpose to the story
- both stories have same "moral"
- similar or identical plots
- incidents
- groupings of incidents
- causal unity between incidents and groups of incidents
- structural devices
- patterns
- point of view
- similar or identical characters
- physical peculiarities of character
- motivations
- dominant psychological peculiarities of character
- names
- occupations
- similar or identical locales

- settings
- similar or identical styles
- peculiar arrangement of words
- peculiar phrasing of passages

The substantial similarity test was employed in a case where Marvel Comics alleged that the lead character, Ralph Hinkley, in the television series, "The Greatest American Hero" was substantially similar to its own Superman. The court ruled that no substantial similarity existed because of the differences of the characters. Superman looks and behaves like a brave hero, who has dedicated his life to fighting the forces of evil. Conversely, the Hinkley character looks frumpy and behaves like a shy, reluctant hero, who grudgingly accepts his missions, but prefers to live his normal life. Also, Superman skillfully performs his superhuman feats and is unquestioningly the master of his own destiny; whereas Hinkley is perplexed by the superhuman power his costume grants him and he uses those powers in a stumbling, comical fashion.

The Harry Potter issues are presently before the court, but a list of the similarities and arguments in favor of finding a substantial similarity between Rowling's Harry Potter and Stouffer's Larry Potter, and other story elements, can be found at <http://www.realmuggles.com>.

Wise, loyal readers might note that in Issue 1 of Deep Magic, J.T. Slane wrote a story titled, 'Wizard Auditions' (you may view that story by [downloading Issue 1](#)) which included appearances by Tolkien's Gandalf, Brooks' Allanon, Eddings' Belgareth, and Arthurian Legend, Merlin. Uh oh, is Deep Magic going to land itself in copyright trouble? If we do, it was a fun ride while it lasted, but we believe we are fairly safe.

Although using these established and copyrighted characters is a technical infringement of a copyright, several defenses, or allowable exceptions, exist. The primary exception, or legal defense, to a copyright infringement is the "fair use" defense. A fair use will be found "for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research." Section 107 of the Copyright Act provides four factors for courts to consider under a fair use analysis: 1) "the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes," 2) "the nature of the copyrighted work," 3) "the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole," and 4) "the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work."

In the case of 'Wizard Auditions,' another exception applies: parody. Parodies of copyrighted materials are more likely to be excused than are other "fair uses" because parodies are considered useful social commentaries. The framework for a parody defense is the same as for other fair use defenses, including the application of the four factors listed above. In J.T. Slane's case, the parody was of the stereotypical fantasy mentor and the creative writing process.

The information related thus far provides a loose framework by which you may stay infringement-free in your writing. If this has been a useful or interesting article, let Deep Magic know, and I will propose a follow-up article that covers how to establish and the duration of a copyright as well as penalties for infringement. Likewise, if there are other legal issues that you would like to see covered, feel free to suggest a future legal topic. One last disclaimer, if you have any specific copyright questions, please consult your local attorney, or review the information at the United States Copyright website: <http://www.loc.gov/copyright/>.

# FLOWER LAND

(FROM THE LEMUIAN CLOUD CHRONICLES)

BY ANNE STICKEL

## CHAPTER ONE: ATTAR

Once, when all the land was one, the powerful wizard Er-Shon dwelt high in the misty mountains of the Middle Kingdom. Lonely, but not alone, lived he and his charming daughter, Ra-Sha. So delicate that her skin had never felt the sun's kiss, Ra-Sha was like a night-blooming jasmine just come into full flower. Her eyes beheld only moon and stars and the night lamp's glow, yet was she blessed with health, wisdom, and wit. Well-schooled from her earliest years, she was the center of Er-Shon's life.

Ra-Sha's black silken river of hair flowed down her back almost to her knees. When she would sit to study, her many cats would play with its strands, delighting her.

Except for her wizard father, her cats were Ra-Sha's only companions. Her favorite pastime was the concocting of scented potions. Even though attar of roses was her most prized ingredient, she'd never questioned its source.

Curious as her cats, one day Ra-Sha finally asked Er-Shon, "Father, what is the source of rose attar?"

He replied, "Why, my daughter, it originates in the Land of Flowers, which lies within the heart of the Great Desert. My jade bowl will show us."

The two gazed upon the crystal surface of a bowl of palest jade (after the proper magic incantations) to behold a most splendid land. The orderly rainbow array of vast flower fields charmed them utterly. So too did the sight of the young Caliph, Jonadan, causing the maiden's heart to dance like a butterfly!

Jonadan was unwed, as was Ra-Sha, and still on the edge of childhood. Ra-Sha's almond eyes looked longingly upon the youth, whose own dark eyes twinkled merrily, as if he could see her there, comical kittens in her lap and on her shoulders like furry courtiers.

Er-Shon, reading his daughter's heart, was determined to please her and to end their mutual solitude. After seeing her back to her study, the wizard unrolled his magic carpet. The bells on its tassels tinkled merrily as he set off for the center of the Great Desert and Flower Land. With him went a small painted portrait of Ra-Sha and a bottle of one of her finest potions.

He left her a note saying that he had gone to fetch more attar of roses. But it should really have said: "I have gone to fulfill your heart's desire."

**The two gazed upon the crystal surface of a bowl of palest jade ... to behold a most splendid land.**

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## IMPERIAL PALACE

BY JOHN EMANUEL SHANNON

[WWW.JESHANNON.COM](http://WWW.JESHANNON.COM)

The internet has developed into a medium where artists all over the world can share their visions. Our featured internal artist is John Emanuel Shannon from the island of Malta. The borders are blurring even more as aspiring artists work on their craft from any place and using any medium. Some day it might not be possible to tell whether a piece was done digitally or with oils. Is that a good thing? Visit Mr. Shannon's website and take a look at some of his other pieces. Then, [come to our message boards and discuss this issue, as well as the artist and his work.](#)

The above piece, Imperial Palace, was done for an online game, which can be found at: <http://www.cotwarlords.com>.

continued from Issue 3

PROCYX  
 CHRONICLE OF THE END STAR OF GRIEF  
 BOOK ONE: DAYS OF DESTRUCTION  
 BY O.R. SAVAGE

CHAPTER FIVE  
 Mhyrn

Palmer fumbled the power cell into the grip of the hand depolarizer. It finally snapped home. Two Security men appeared at the door, unarmed but willing to help. Palmer nodded them in, gave them his plan, and they moved.

Merin's weapon discharged down the corridor as they arrived, exploding a relay box in the wall. The ferryship lurched and shuddered, jarring everyone off their feet, and Merin tumbling down the ramp. The Security men recovered first and leapt onto him. This was not the way Palmer had planned it. He now positioned himself for a clear shot while they wrestled to disarm him. A horrible flash painted the hallway, and one of the Security men pitched aside in convulsive death, his midsection smoldering. With unnatural strength, Merin thrust the other away and snuffed out his life.

At the exact moment Palmer stubbed the trigger, the ferryship lurched again, taking his balance. His shot missed its target, instead blasting out a section of wall. Still on the floor, the shaman used those precious seconds to aim his weapon squarely at Palmer's head.

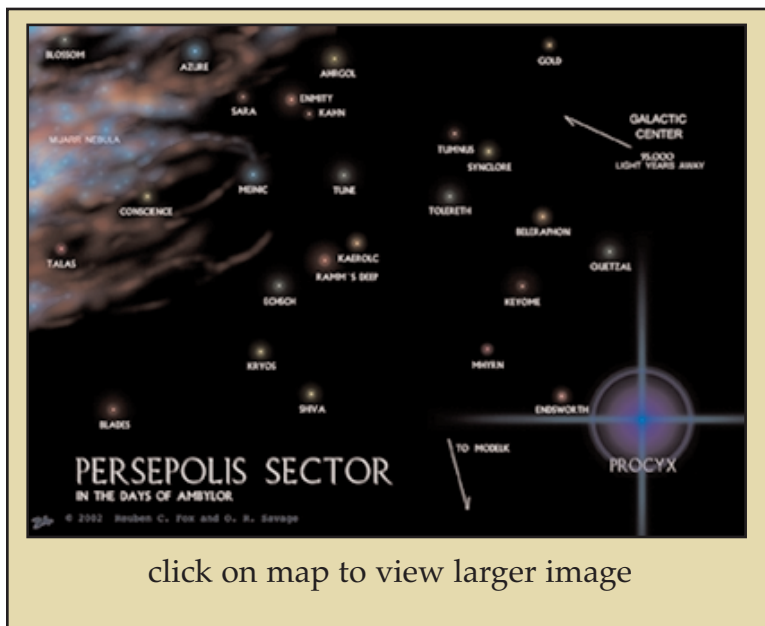
"No, infidel!" His voice cracked. Perspiration covered his forehead and his robes wore sweat

stains. Though obviously shaken, Merin still controlled the situation. "You have lost! Throw your weapon down the hall—out of sight. I do not want you to see where you throw it. Go on. Now!"

Palmer held onto the depolarizer.

"You cannot possibly bring it to bear before I kill you. You know this."

Merin was right. Even if Palmer *did* manage to swing the depolarizer into the shaman's general direction, his shot might well stray into the control bubble. It could wreck instrumentation or kill someone. He sighed and carefully threw the handgun down the corridor that went to the observation bubble.



click on map to view larger image

The shaman stood carefully, glancing quickly behind him for any flanking assault. Once on his feet he smashed his elbow against the controls for the blast doors to the bubble and they closed in a wink. Merin relaxed a little, but his hands shook all the more. The shaman shook his head as if in incredulity. "You shall be the first to die," he said in a near whisper, then he gritted his teeth and hissed at Palmer. "So arrogant and self-assured. Butchers!" He came down the ramp toward him.

This was it. Palmer had never quite expected to die at the hands of a terrorist—vaporized by a depolarizer set to full power. He thought, sickeningly, of the security men lying dead a meter away—their agony in death. But worst of all, Palmer would never see Arrleen again.

Palmer decided. He would not lie here prostrate and die at the whim of a fanatic. He would die in action—at least, in motion.

He started to get to his feet but Merin kicked him hard across his shoulder. Palmer flew backward, tumbling down the ramp until he hit the level floor at its base. The pain made his eyes water. He could hardly move without passing out. He lay still, watching the shaman stroll casually down the ramp toward him. His depolarizer hummed dangerously.

Palmer resolved himself to failure. There was only death now. He shut his eyes and braced himself.

In a voice that was almost tender, Merin spoke. "So it shall be to all Federation vermin."

Through his closed eyelids, Palmer saw the violet flash from the depolarizer.

There was the beginning of a scream, then silence.

Dumbfounded, Palmer opened his eyes to behold a sight he would never forget. Gaultor stood at the crossing halls, his deep-set eyes riveted on the smoking pile of ashes that was all that remained of the hijacker. Palmer's discarded depolarizer rested in the Mhyrnian's large hand, still glowing from its lethal discharge.

Suddenly there was a flood of tranzed messages so insistent that Palmer shut them off abruptly. Whatever the shaman had used to block the network had been destroyed with him. Gaultor turn to him.

"It is as I have always feared. Merin never seemed able to embrace the ways of Zorl. He was always speaking of violence, Colonel." Gaultor's expression gnarled in a cross between resolution and revulsion. But overriding it was a steeled steadiness of self-control, perhaps limitless control. There was more to this Mhyrnian than Palmer had ever imagined. Gaultor looked back at the remains of the shaman, then at the charred bodies of the two dead security men.

"He was an Off Worlder and had only recently joined the Followers of Zorl. Merin stirred my people against you many times back on Ahrgol. Even I joined in making oaths against you. I did not know him well. But I see now. I know now that your cause is a just and good one. You fulfill your words, and he took lives—a sin unforgivable except in defense, and even then only to be followed by much fasting and prayer. He acted on his own. I hope you know that I knew nothing of this. That is why I have acted. If I have offended God, then I must pay—but you are now free."

The depolarizer slipped to the floor with a clack. Gaultor stared with blurry eyes at the human rubble he had made, then turned and walked away. He looked suddenly old and very tired.

For a time, stillness reigned, and then several security men converged down the corridors to assist Palmer. Unknowing, one of them grabbed at his damaged arm to lift him to his feet. Palmer vomited and passed out. The searing pain disappeared, mercifully, into unconsciousness.

Dreams—or visions—or memories—or reality? Palmer could not decide.

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## LANDMOOR

BY JEFF WHEELER

### XIX

Roye scrubbed a trail of sticky ale from the wooden counter with a damp cloth. Three customers were passed out at the bar, and one snored with a throaty growl. The hearth fire snapped, keeping the chill of the sea's wind outside the Foxtale. Rubbing his bleary eyes, Roye stepped around the bar and cursed the name of Flent Shago. Normally, Flent would have carried the drunks to the porch and let them sleep until the street dogs woke them up by licking the ale from their faces. But the Drugaen was gone and no amount of complaining would bring him close enough to cuff. And since Ticastasy had vanished too, it had been murder running the tavern that night by himself.

"Ungrateful Drugaen," Roye muttered to himself. He shook his head. "Girl...you better not be working for anyone else. I swore I'd counter any offer you got." He poked the nearest man with his thick finger and grumbled for him to get out. The man stirred, said a few slurred words, and Roye grabbed his shirt and helped him stand. It took a few moments before all three were either lying cozy off the porch or stumbling half-blind into the fog-misted streets. The garrison watch would find them, Roye thought, wiping his hands. Then they would be *their* problem.

Jingling a few coins he had snatched from their pockets to pay the tab they owed, he pulled the crossbar over the door and limped over to a stool to rest. *Old bones getting tired*, he thought, rubbing his swollen fingers over his scalp. He finished off the left-over drink from one of the patrons' mugs before reaching for a well-used deck of playing cards. He flipped through it and smiled, remembering how good the Drugaen had become playing Bones. The dull expression on his face had lured unwary gamblers into playing high stakes. Added to the gracious way he lost and how he appeared to win by mistake, it made him a reliable source of income. Roye frowned. He hadn't paid the Drugaen what he should have, but what had he ever asked for? A place to stay, some stew to eat, and all the drink he could swallow. Not a shabby trade, Roye thought, in a world that had little a Drugaen could trade his muscles for.

Roye dumped the cards on the counter and began picking up the empty mugs and plates. He wondered how long Flent and Ticastasy would be gone or if they would ever come back. How many days had it been? They were the reason behind the success of the Foxtale. Ticastasy had a way of making the place shine. Not just her personality, but how she arranged things in the place. He'd paid her well, but maybe another innkeeper had finally lured her away. The Drugaen could be replaced, but it would all be very costly.



A thump sounded at the door. At first Roye thought the wind had shaken it. But it sounded a second time, rattling the crossbar. Roye huffed and walked towards another table.

"I'm closed!" He turned his back to it, not waiting for a response. "Why is there always someone thirsty right before sunrise?" he muttered. "It's so banned late I can hardly see."

"Roye. It's Tsyрке."

The tavernkeeper stopped. He knew that voice. Even worse, he knew what the voice wanted. Fear knifed him in the ribs, and he took a cautious step backwards. *Oh, for Hate's sake! Why did he have to show up tonight!* "Everybody's gone," Roye stammered, his mouth dry and hot. "Just cleanin' up, Tsyрке – why don't you come back in a few hours..."

"Roye," the voice warned. "Open the door."

The owner of the Foxtale dropped the plates on the nearest table. Limping forward, he unlatched the door and pulled it open, fighting against the wind. The sudden chill from the sea cut into his skin and made his teeth chatter. It was Tsyрке Phollen, the sea captain who had taken a liking to Ticastasy. One of the richest men in Ilvaren – and one of the most dangerous.

*I should have closed up an hour ago, Roye thought angrily. If I'd been in bed, he wouldn't have found me here. Ban those two! Ban them to Pitan!*

The musty smell of the ocean clung to the man's clothes and armor. Roye did not think it strange at all that he wore a long hauberk under his thick salt-stained tunic. A man with his reputation was a target for thieves and worse. Tsyрке had a tousel of sandy brown hair that was cropped short like most Shorelanders preferred. The hauberk clinked and rattled as he entered the Foxtale, swinging the door shut behind him. A tattered red cape hung lop-sided down his back, discolored by soot and blood stains. Deep brown eyes glanced over the empty tables and rested at last on Roye. His wind-burned face was hard and showed the faint tug of a frown. He was not happy. Roye's mind raced for a way to start the conversation.

Tsyрке Phollen stole the chance. "Just be quick, Roye," he said. "She's not at home. She's not in the back. She's not anywhere in Sol that I could tell. Now where is she?"

"W..who? Oh, 'Stasy – yes, she's not in the back..."

Tsyрке scanned the bar, eyeing a keg with hunger in his eyes. "I don't have much time. Where is she?"

"Would you...like something to drink?" Without waiting for the answer, Roye hurried to the bar and dribbled two cups of Spider Ale. "Come have a sit and lets talk – you been sailing long? How is your ship?"

The thud of Tsyрке's boots came across the planked floor and the callused hand closed around the mug. His thumb rubbed across the rim for a moment before he took a deep swallow and savored it. Raising his angry eyes to the tavernkeeper, he said softly, "You don't care about my ship. You don't care about me. But you'd better start speaking the truth, Roye – or by Achrolese, I'll beat it out of you! If she went off with another man, you'd best hurry and tell me."

Roye saw the huge broadsword strapped to the man's back and swallowed a few gulps of the ale to steady himself. He didn't know for certain where Ticastasy had gone, but he thought he had enough of an idea to get Tsyрке out of his tavern.

"Don't jump to conclusions. She left just the other night, after a huge scrape your brother started in here. The damage alone cost me nearly a hundred Aralonian pieces. And since he's your brother, I was thinking that..."

The man's eyes narrowed with contempt. "Secrist came here? Already? Sons of fire, he never arrives in time. He was supposed to be here tomorrow." He gave Roye a hard look. "I'm not paying

Continued from page 10

It had not worked. The hard drink clouded his recollection of the previous days and weeks, but the ghastly memories haunted him and lived on in his terrifying, drink-induced dreams. The memories followed him wherever he went. So, he gave up drinking. Well, serious drinking. He cut his hair and began traveling the trade routes along the Northern Rim Mountains. Keeping busy pre-occupied his mind from thoughts that his afterlife would not consist of feasts and glory, but of fire and pain.

Craden had long since given up hope that he could regain his soul. Two scars reminded him of his fate daily. One was a jagged line that ran from the center of his forehead to his right ear, which he tried to keep hidden under a short curtain of graying hair. The other was the emptiness in his chest.

One cool autumn day, when the sun's heat was welcome and the leafy birch and aspen began to shed their multi-colored cloaks on both sides of the Wendell Pass, a caravan of wool merchants traveled the winding trail to Torrend Village. Craden walked at the rear of the group with a stuffed pack slung over his right shoulder. The others led horses and wagons overflowing with high quality wool, but Craden's pack was full of spun silk that would fetch ten times the price of the heaviest load of wool.

As the sun sank behind them, a scrawny courier in blue livery came running across an already harvested grain field. His cheeks were red and he gulped air like a bellyfish in a boat while gathering himself to share important news. "A scroll has been posted... at the Golden Herring Inn in Sendra Downs... of the Brandyspring Valley." The lad gasped a few more times to catch his breath. "A golden scroll... it promises of a chance to meet a God and ask a question." Some of the traders laughed, but the boy went on, "It's the truth, good sirs, word has spread through all the valley and I'm on my way to Bearstone to tell my own cousins. There's going to be a feast. A huge one. Most all of the folks in the valley will be there, others too."

The boy shrugged in response to a query of when the scroll had been posted, but added, "I saw it with my own eyes and it looked real expensive. No one in the valley had ever seen such a scroll." He looked eagerly from one face to another, but the traders kept their purse strings drawn. Traders knew the value of a coin.

"When is this feast, lad?" Craden asked, producing a silver nickel from his belpouch.

"Three nights hence on Autumn Solstice."

With a flick, the coin flittered across the path to the boy, who caught it with both hands and nodded his appreciation.

"What's your name, lad?" Craden asked.

"Rodder. Rodder Junts, sir." Soon, Rodder was trotting up the trail. As the other traders made jokes about the boy and his story, Craden adjusted his pack on his left shoulder, turned to the west, and followed the setting sun toward Brandyspring Valley.

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The Brandyspring Valley stretched south-west from the midpoint of the Northern Rim Mountains, along a meandering path between gently sloping hills. It leveled out in a wide-mouthed dell where the river of the same name was diverted in dozens of places to quench the thirst of patchwork grain and potato farms. Farming settlements and goat, sheep, and cattle ranches afforded existence to most of the folks who called the valley their home. In the south end of the valley, harvests on both grain and potato crops had been finished weeks earlier, leaving the landscape cut into

squares of gold and brown.

Halfway up the valley and nestled against the base of a green hill, Sendra Downs was the largest village, although no larger than a fair-sized hamlet. A successful gold rush two generations earlier had swelled the village into the thousands for several years and brought enough wealth to support the building of three inns. The inns had long since lost their purpose, but spring and autumn harvests afforded a chance for the inhabitants of the valley to gather in celebration of planting and harvesting respectively. Goat pastures and wild orchards predominated the surrounding hills, which gave the village a more progressive reputation than other parts of the valley, or so the locals contended.

Craden reached Sendra Downs before dawn on the day of Autumn Solstice. Before entering, he stopped and shook his head in disbelief. The lad was right about the crowd. Along the pathway into Sendra hundreds of tents, wagons, and heavy bedrolls sheltered people from the cold. The road that split the village in east and west halves was encroached by more camped travelers. Craden imagined many of the roadside sleepers had reached town at night and found no better place to rest in the dark. Toward the center of the village, a squat rectangle of gray boards and thatched roof bore a hand-painted sign, The Grey Goathand. Craden peeked through a greasy window and saw dozens of men sleeping under blankets on the floor of the main room.

With the sun creeping over the eastern hills, life began stirring. By the time Craden reached the next inn, a handful of people were gathered on the porchboards. The front of the building looked to have fallen down recently. In flaking red paint that may have been older than Rodder Junts, the sign above the door proclaimed the place to be the Golden Herring. Just as the boy had promised, tacked to the front door was a golden scroll. After nudging his way past a couple slow-moving men, Craden read the message. A chance to receive an answer to one question. He read it again. And again. On more than one occasion, he had been cheated by a dishonest trader who made an offer that seemed to say one thing until Craden's coin was delivered and the truth was revealed. He would not be caught by a clever phrase in this matter. Try as he did, Craden found no guile in the simple promise. He was simply left with hoping to be chosen, and seeing if the message actually came from a God. If the innkeeper was the source of the scroll, it was well worth his investment, but it might haunt him if the promise went unfulfilled and the crowd turned on him.

Craden stopped at the only bakery in town, glanced in the stained windows, and saw the single oven puffing out smoke. Only a few people had roused sufficiently to make their way to the bakery, and he decided to mark his good fortune at arriving just in time for a warm breakfast by eating three scones. The grease in a large kettle popped as the dough cooked. A sleepy-eyed girl of about twelve jumped every time a splatter landed on her bare arms. By the time his bread was done, she had found a long-sleeved tunic and was re-tying her apron over it. Taking his food outside to eat, he pushed through a growing mass of people. Already, a line of men waited to enter the bakery and more were walking up the road toward it.

Craden realized that most of the people he encountered had been men. Perhaps women did not need the wisdom of a God, or perhaps they could smell a rotten deal when men could not. Whatever the reason, he saw at least eight men for every woman as people filled the village. He cared little for large crowds, and would not have come to Sendra Downs except the promise was too valuable to ignore.

Realizing he would find no quiet corner in which to eat, Craden scanned the countryside east of the village. He considered heading up the western hills, but did not want to look into the morning sun as he kept an eye on the town. Halfway up the eastern slope, a low rock wall divided a

browning pasture from a leaf-fallen orchard. It would offer a decent vantage point from which to rest and wait for the evening.

By mid-morning, a handful of travelers had ascended the hill to join Craden at the wall. He greeted those who came close enough with a cordial “hello” but kept his arms folded tightly across his chest to let them know he was not interested in conversation. Below, the valley swarmed with life. Thousands of people jostled about, lines stretched around each of the inns, the bakery, and the other two eateries. Locals even sold food and drink from their cellars and porches. Beyond the village, campfire smoke ascended into the clear sky in thirty or more columns.

Around midday, great wagons pulled by teams of four, six, and even eight workhorses drove down the winding road from the northern forests. The wagons were loaded to capacity with lengths of evergreen trunks. The wagons slowed to let the crowd part and then trudged ahead to the center of the village where teams of men drew the logs off the wagons and stacked them into a great cone. More and more wood was added until even the largest team of men could stack the logs no higher.

Afternoon brought the loudest reverie of people, song, and laughter Craden had heard since the victory party that followed the taking of Venetia. Although not as celebratory as the crowd welcoming home the Northern Fleet, the good folks in Sendra offered plenty of cheer. Craden lost himself for a while in the sour thoughts that war dug up. Hundreds of terrified faces called to him from years earlier. Soldiers’ faces.

“Your heart looks like it could use a lift, sir,” a bug-eyed lad said. His hands fidgeted to find a resting position.

Craden had greeted the young man early in the day, and he had stayed a little closer than the others. Craden figured the lad needed a friend. He chose the wrong man. “I suppose there are any number of things that can lift a man’s heart down there.” Craden nodded to the town. “But worry about your own heart, young man — before you lose it in a war or a maiden’s bed.” He refused to look the lad in the face.

“Aye. Sorry, good man. I’ll not tarry you,” the lad said, turning to follow the fence line south.

Craden glanced at the lad and saw that his lanky frame was covered with ragged breeches and no coat. He cursed himself for not being able to let the young man go, but called out, “Wait. You tarry no one on this hillside, lad. But, tell me, are you from the Brandyspring Valley?”

“Aye,” the young man said, then turned and hurried back. Skin pealed from week-old burns on his cheeks, and his eyebrows were badly singed.

“What part?”

“Coalhaven in the south, down where the fires never cease and the iron wrought from the red hills is hard and true.”

“Hard and true, you say?” Craden said with a chuckle. “How does one forge iron that is ‘true’?”

The young man cocked his head and all signs of intelligence washed from his face. “Well, I suppose, we always just said that. Down in Coalhaven. I think, or rather, I believe... hmm. I guess it must mean the iron is straight and without error.” The young man did not appear certain of his words at all.

“Yes, well. I guess that must be it.” Craden offered a smile, which the young man eagerly returned.

In the hours that followed, Craden regretted being nice to the young man, who identified himself as Brandr. Craden learned more than he cared to know about mining coal and ore, refining and forging iron, and smithing it into dozens of shapes. He found an extra coat for Brandr in his

pack and insisted the young man take it. Having been burned in a dozen places by a campfire the previous winter, the coat was worth little, but it would keep the young man from freezing in the cold autumn evening.

As afternoon wore into evening, Craden decided it was about time to head into town. As they rose, Brandr caught Craden with the question he had been expecting all day, "What question would you ask?"

Craden shook his head. "I'm not sure. I guess I'll figure that out if the time comes when I need to know." He felt a little uneasy lying to the young man. "Look now, they're going to light the fire. We ought to make our way to town before the sun falls behind those mountains." Craden heaved his pack over his shoulder and began tromping down the slope, avoiding goat dung as he followed the narrow trail. Loose rocks pelted into Craden's boots as Brandr scrambled to keep up. From the muted curses, Craden knew that Brandr had not succeeded in avoiding the goat dung.

Once they merged with the masses of people filling the narrow streets of Sendra Downs, it did not take long for Craden to lose Brandr. It was better that way, he decided. Soon, he realized that with his mind muddled in the past and on the question he would ask if chosen, he had forgotten that his pack was stuffed with valuable silk that might be easy to unload on a newly rich innkeeper. He smiled as he forced his way through the crowds packing the common room of the Grey Goathand.

The odor of stale ale and staler bodies made Craden gag as he squinted and sought out the owner in the dim candlelight. He knew that his nose and eyes would get used to the room with time, but first they would have to forgive him. Dirker Ventice, the owner, stood behind the bar, barking orders at three serving girls. Craden waited several minutes for an opening, put on his winning smile and said, "Master Ventice, I see you are busy, but please give me a short moment of your time. I'm a trader from the Northern Rim and I carry a load of the finest silks that you'll ever see."

"The finest what?" The red-faced, balding man replied, shaking his head and glancing around as if trying to find someone new to yell at.

"Silk. The fabric of kings and queens."

"Sorry, ain't got no kings or queens 'round here." The owner turned and grabbed a stout woman by the shoulder and yelled at her to bring up whatever barrels remained in the cellar.

Craden pursed his lips in frustration and let the man disappear behind the bar. Then, he saw the answer to his problem. The owner's wife, or so he guessed, stood at the top of the stairs with a golden chalice in one hand. She was surrounded by a company of ladies dressed adequately for the size of the town. Craden would wager the value of his load of silk that none had seen fabric of the quality he carried. Judging by the price a tankard was bringing, the pudgy-faced wife of the owner would have no trouble paying high market value. He was wrong again. With an extra portion of flattery, the load brought double high market value. Craden felt a little guilty taking the gold. Never had he increased the weight of his pack by trading silk for gold, but fortune was with him this night.

Craden returned to the outdoors and sought the edge of town where the crowd thinned. As he went, he wondered what was going to happen. What event would mark the selection of those who would speak with a God? People on the streets asked the question of each other, but Craden never heard a satisfactory answer.

Even more frequently asked and answered was the question of what one would ask the God if selected. Craden was amused at several of the responses he heard. "Which women in my village would accept a marriage proposal?" a skinny, red haired man said with a beaming smile.

“Where can I find an undiscovered gold mine?” “Diamond mine?” and “Ruby field?” three different, but equally greedy-looking men said. Each appeared to have given second thought to telling a stranger such a keen idea, but also appeared unable to withhold sharing such brilliance.

A clean-faced boy in pressed violet robes told a group that the question all of them should ask was, “What is the purpose of life?” But, the people laughed or offered that they already knew the purpose of life. The loudest of those taunting the young man suggested drinking, carousing, or getting rich.

Craden continued moving around the edges of town, hoping for something to happen. The Golden Herring was unapproachable. People packed around the porch and roadway in front of the building like ants trying to get in the anthill at the start of a thunderstorm. Craden pondered the likelihood that the owner had invested twenty gold to have a barrister from a big city down south write the scroll. The owner would cash in on the autumn solstice and retire on the pile of gold that the crowds left behind.

Twice Craden crossed paths with Brandr, who appeared to have found a way to pay for enough drinks to intoxicate him. Craden could not help but wonder about giving the young man a coat when he could afford drinks. It did not matter, he decided. At least Brandr would not die if he passed out in a nearby field this night.

Later, as the night wore long, fights began to break out. There were many soldiers in town, or former warriors from the battles that ended at mid-summer. Some wars continued into the winter, but the Legion of Renderick, led by Renderick the Black, had brought many seasoned soldiers, mercenaries, and attendants back into civilization. A burly, bearded man cracked at least three skulls in a skirmish by the fire.

Craden recognized a boy running away from that skirmish as Rodder Junts, the messenger. He wondered whether he should acknowledge the boy, or crack him on the skull for delivering him hope that he had not had in years. If that hope turned out to be a waste, the lad would deserve a sore lump on the head. Craden grunted; the lad could not have known if the scroll was a ruse.

With the night slipping away and more fights breaking out, Craden decided to slip out of town and let his heart begin to sink. As he ascended the hillside to the orchard wall, he decided the pack full of gold made the trip worth the disappointment. He tried to convince himself of that, anyway. Before he succumbed to sleep, the noise of distant panic roused him. The bakery, which was the building closest to the fire, blazed like a great candle. Craden, too far up the hill to be of any use, watched as men ran to get water from the nearby stream. They had the fire nearly put out as Craden drifted to sleep.

A bright sun and crows cawing loudly in the orchard behind him awoke Craden about mid-morning of the next day. He wished the crows had flown south with the other birds, but apparently they were more stubborn. For a moment, his breath halted and his mind blurred. Where was his pack? Breath came when he saw the old leather bag on the other side of a stray boulder next to the wall. His heart slowed to normal when he felt the weight of the gold within as he lifted the pack and set it on the wall.

Down below, people were still camped around the town. Many were awake, but the feeling of celebration from the night before had been replaced with a subdued hangover that permeated their movements and mood. At least, that was his impression from the hillside.

From the sick feeling in his stomach, Craden felt like he had eaten a batch of rotten stew, but he knew it had nothing to do with the goat shanks he ate the previous evening. He paid too much for them, but he had plenty of gold to spare. The hope of having his question answered had con-

sumed him for the previous two days. Now, he would have to wonder on his own if there was any way to redeem his soul. Again, his mind opened the hard memories of the faces of the men who died because of him. They were the faces of soldiers who trusted him. The memories brought on another wave of sickness. When he had cleaned himself up and put his life together years earlier, he put the memories in a place where his mind could avoid the daily pain, but they were always there. Now, he would have to put them back again, or lose himself.

He had a bag full of gold, after all, enough to buy the silk looms and worms he had long wanted to own. Instead of buying and selling, he could now produce and sell. That would enable him to settle, support a family... if he could find a woman who would marry him and be willing to start a family with him. His fingers traced the scar on his face. He was not an unattractive man, but certainly nothing to draw eyes. Especially with that scar. Not only was the scar disfiguring, but it always brought questions about how he received it.

Craden was ready to put Sendra Downs behind him and return to Torrend Village when he decided to count his gold one more time. Perhaps the wool merchants would still be there. They might have a laugh at his foolishness for following the boy's promise, but he would squelch their mirth with one sight at his haul. He thought about leaving before the innkeeper found out how much his wife had spent on the silk, but felt safe up on the hill.

When Craden opened his pack, expecting to see the bright glint of light off of a mound of gold, his heart stopped. Instead of gold, he saw a cream colored scroll with gold flecks on the parchment. With a trembling hand, he pulled the scroll out, and dropped the pack. It clinked as it hit the ground, spilling out a handful of the coins that lay beneath the scroll.

To Craden's surprise, the scroll contained a map with two words below. "Nightfall, tonight." At first he did not recognize any place on the map, but then, he saw on the bottom, a valley that looked like it could be the Brandyspring Valley. A trail began at the top of the valley, and traversed several mountains and forests in a region Craden believed to be uninhabited. The land to the north was harsh and impassable. It was also dangerous. Wolf packs and creatures that hunted man lived there. Craden hefted his load of gold and considered his choices.

Judging by the distance represented on the map, it would be hard, but not impossible to reach the destination on foot by nightfall. The problem was, his only weapon was a short, weak bow he used to hunt small game. Traveling into the wild would expose him to significant risks. On the other hand, the map was a key to unlocking the question that had nearly consumed him. The map might also be a trick of thieves to lure him to where they could rob him. That was unlikely because if thieves were at work, they would have taken his gold when they slipped the scroll into his pack the night before.

Craden knew the only decision that would let him sleep at night would be to follow the map and see where it led. Hefting his pack over his shoulder, he smiled contentedly at its weight. With the sun warming his stiff body, he picked his way along the hillside to meet up with the road that led to the north end of the valley.

Around midday, Craden's feet were hot and tired from the steady pace he kept and the rocky path that led him toward the northern peak of the Brandyspring Valley. He had followed the path of the river most of the morning, with a few shortcuts when the flow meandered through a glen or two. As he reached the top of the valley, a gnawing feeling reminded him that his pack contained little food. Orchards had become more sparse and the gentle sloping hills were replaced by towering peaks and boulder-riddled inclines. Evergreen trees dotted the slopes, but only sporadic pockets of short grub brush provided sustenance to grazing goats.



Craden slowed at the last orchard he could see between himself and the rim of the mountains ahead. At this height, only the heartiest winter-apples grew. Fortune smiled upon him. Several of the trees still bore yellow fruit high in the branches. The apples would be mealy with the number of frosts the fall had recorded, but they would be edible. He quickly climbed the healthiest looking tree and began plucking his lunch. By the time he finished his fifth apple, juices dripped off his chin and coated his hands and forearms with sticky residue. A small pocket of horse gnats fluttered around his head, attracted by the fruit and a chance at his blood. Craden wondered how the little bugs survived the hard freezes this high. Engaged in waving away his attackers, Craden did not hear the man approach.

"Hello," called the familiar voice of Brandr.

Craden's muscles locked as he glanced down at the young man, who was taking air in by the mouthful. "Hoy, Brandr. Have you been following me all morning?"

"Aye. But, only because I haven't been able to keep up."

"I'm on my own business, lad. You've wasted your steps." Craden gave the other a serious look to ensure that his words were given the proper weight. "Where I go, I go alone."

Brandr shook his head defensively, "You misunderstand, sir. When I woke up this morning, I found a scroll with a map on it in the pocket of this coat. The map said to go this way and I am only following you because you are headed the same way. Did you get a map?"

Craden suddenly felt less sure about following the map, and certainly less fortunate for having received it. He wondered how many other people received the map. "Hmm. Yes, I have such a map." Then, he realized they were at an impasse. Craden could not insist Brandr turn around and head the other way, but he did not want another's company on this mission, either.

"Mind if we go on together?"

Craden again remembered his weak bow and saw that Brandr had a sword at his hip. Even if the young man did not know how use the sword, which Craden suspected by the lad's awkward look, at least he had a weapon. "I suppose that'd be fine."

Brandr's smile stretched wide and a look of relief washed over his face. "Thanks, sir. I know we'll be able to make good speed of our trip and it'll be safer with two."

Craden made a note that it might prove worthwhile to play a game of bone dice with the lad... for gold. "Aye."

Brandr devoured no fewer than nine apples on the trail as they crested the Northern Mountains and cut into the backcountry beyond. Craden wondered when the lad last had a good meal. Thick forests grew in valley pockets and steep cliffs dropped away into broken rocks, white-flowing streams, and mountain pools. The trail grew more difficult to follow and soon, Craden relied only on the large mountains on the map as a guide.

Afternoon wore on, and they still had one more set of peaks to traverse. Craden studied the map carefully, realizing that if they chose the wrong pass, they would not make their destination by sunset. He cursed himself for sleeping as late as he did. He lost valuable time sleeping away the morning. The map showed four peaks, but Craden could see five. The map indicated they should take the middle gap, but was it really the second or third?

"Why didn't you ask me what question I was going to ask the God last night?" Brandr interjected, catching the trader off guard.

Craden lowered the map and looked into Brandr's eyes. "I don't know for sure, guess it was none of my business."

Brandr appeared to be thinking on the simple answer. "Didn't you care to know?"

Craden, not wanting to get entrenched in the young man's personal problems, replied, "no, I guess I didn't." Seeing the hurt in Brandr's eyes, he added, "what a man wants to ask a God is a very personal thing, and having just met you, I didn't figure it was my business to know."

"Oh, I see."

Craden could tell the young man wanted to talk more about it, but he chose instead to use their time more wisely. If they reached their destination that night and the young man still wanted to talk, they could talk then. If they did not choose the right pass, it would not matter what either of them wanted to ask a God. "We have to keep going, Brandr. Daylight's slipping and we need to clear the next pass. I don't know if it's the second or third gap." Craden indicated the two with his right hand.

"Yes, of course." Brandr nodded sullenly. He consulted the map in Craden's hand and looked at the line of peaks. He looked at the map again, then at the peaks.

After Brandr repeated this three times, Craden interrupted, "you'll hurt your neck, lad. Slow down. I think we ought to just take the second gap, that's what the map says." He again indicated the pass with his right hand.

Brandr chewed his lower lip and spoke in a cautious tone, "Umm. Well, I think that's not the way, sir. I think that's the first pass. That left peak looks like it belongs with the other four, but if you look at the shadows from the other peaks; I think you can see that it is really some distance behind them. I think the four begin there." He pointed at the second peak.

Craden squinted his eyes and studied the mountains for a while. Shaking his head, he clapped the young man on the back, "Brandr, you're right. By the Gods, let's follow your path and get there."

They moved quickly across the rocky terrain and rugged pass to get to the other side of the peak before the sun sank.

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A rising stem of smoke drifted east on a lazy evening breeze. Below, the fire popped and sparks showered over a vast stone hearth in the center of the winter-bare glen. It had been more than a cycle since the last of the golden leaves fell to the ground and the ancient trees ringing the glen weaved naked branches like a wreath high into the air. The ground, matted with dormant grasses, was already hard with frost and would not soften until late spring.

Nearly a dozen men milled about the hearth, turning periodically to bake evenly on all sides and warding off the oncoming cold with bellowing laughter, thick fur coats, and generous tankards of ale. Two attendants with narrow shoulders and bony hands worked to keep timber on the fire and ale in the tankards. Another put a goat on a spit and ushered the drinking men aside so he could set the spit over the hot coals on the west side of the hearth. The men moved without paying notice as they listened to a huge, broad-faced man with a long beard, which was gold at its tip but gray at his chin, continue to tell his story.

"...But the whelp of a boy didn't realize the boar hunt was that morning and the lord of the manor always fed his fat gelding an extra bucket of oats himself – first thing in the morn'. He mixed in a pint of brandy to keep the beast warm, or to soften its mood at having to carry the even fatter lord all over the Harchuld Mountains. Well, when the lord opened the stall door, there was his courier, naked as the sunrise with the ugliest maid of the house snug under his arm." The men laughed so hard that ale sloshed onto at least half of their boots.

The bearded man, Ahrik, bade them to hold their laughter; “The lad had his tights almost up to his thighs when he ran out of the barn. He was lucky that even with his girdings about his knees he could outdistance the lord. But his luck piddled down his leg, and it wasn’t the only thing that did, when he reached the courtyard and found the rest of the hunters washing down their breakfast with a tank and a smoke of bowl. That was where I saw the lad and I saw him but for a blink. Quick as a sparrow, he jittered off the other way. I don’t know if he was shriveled more from the cold of the morning or from the wrath of his lord... but I think it might have been because we all saw who he’d been with.”

By the time Ahrik was finished, even the workers were laughing. Craden was not.

“Don’t you like a good story?” Jitru, a short and rotund man with mischievous eyes, challenged, slapping Craden on the shoulder. The other men slowed their peals of laughter.

“I enjoy a good story as much as anyone. Well, almost as much,” Craden paused, waiting until all eyes were on him, “but, I’ve long since spent my mirth on stories of couriers, attendants, groomsmen, stable hands, and any other manner of man getting caught naked, with any manner of lass, in a barn by the lord of the manor. The story is old and tired. Even with the few nuances our bearded friend added.” Craden’s gaze took in each of the other men. “But don’t let me spoil the mood. You’re enjoying yourselves. Drink. Laugh. I’ll laugh when the story warrants it.”

“Who are you?” Ahrik asked, not letting the smile slip from his face.

“I’ll wager he’s a courier,” Gerwin, a broad-shouldered man in a bright green tunic, interrupted.

Craden’s cheeks lifted with a laugh, “Now that’s funny.”

The group loosened up and soon nobody noticed that Craden had never actually given his name. He returned to the edge of the group, with his back warmed by the fire, while others told stories that grew more boisterous and less believable as the evening transpired. Eventually, two barrels of ale had been spent, the conversation returned to where it began that evening.

“What question will you ask of the God?” Gerwin inquired of Ahrik, and then looked around as if to open the question to all of the men. Before they had gotten to know each other, the men had not divulged their questions. Now, with lightened inhibitions, tongues loosened as they sat around the fire, hungrily awaiting the roasting goat.

The bearded man was returning from his pack with a second coat. He sat on a stump of log and tugged the coat firmly over his shoulders. “My oldest son, Thorad, died last winter in the war against the Rhodurian Horde at Walek Bay. He was a valiant warrior, but I’ve heard unsettling rumors and have been haunted by nightmares of how he met his fate. I want to know how he died and whether he now feasts at the table of the Gods.”

The men were silent for a moment. It was Craden who responded, after having been quiet most of the evening, “That would be two questions, friend. The scroll says we might have the chance to ask any one question of a God.” Ahrik rose, reaching for a long handled ax with a grotesquely curved blade that leaned against the stump. “Do you want to see your God tonight?”

Craden held his hands up defensively, “Certainly not, Ahrik. I’ve no doubt that you could easily dispatch my soul, but I was only trying to be helpful. If we only get to ask one question, we should take care to prepare the question we want answered most.”

Ahrik took his hand off his ax, but did not sit back down.

The narrow-shouldered attendants settled the tension with heaping platters of carved goat shank. Steam and aroma wafted around the campfire and soon all of the men were filling plates and mugs. Craden decided the meal would have been better if some of the juices had been gathered in

kettles and turned into thick gravy, but the seasoned meat more than adequately filled his stomach. Thoughts of the over-ripe apples he had at mid-day faded. He smiled as he watched Brandr beat all of the wide-bodied soldier types to the platters for a second helping. The lad's going to fill both legs tonight, he thought.

After dinner, the mood remained jovial, and the loud stories and hearty laughter stretched into the night. Yet, as the night progressed, an unspoken anxiousness crept into the celebration. When would the attendants advise them of their selection and set forth the terms under which they would be allowed a God's audience? Craden had long since wondered which God it would be. Hours passed without answer and the attendants settled into the wagon for the night.

Resigning himself to the fact that he would get no answers before sunrise, Craden took a rolled bearskin from the stack near the wagon and wrapped himself next to the fire. Securing his pack under the skin and feeling its bulk against his side, he decided let the stories of war and glory the other men were still sharing carry him into sleep. At least that way, his mind would be free of the horrid thoughts of all those men dying so many years before... because of him.

"I sure thought you were going to feel Ahrik's axe on your head tonight." Brandr had quietly gathered himself into a bearskin next to Craden.

"Aye," Craden replied in an obviously sleepy voice, hoping the lad would take a hint.

"You were brave to stand up to him. You don't even carry a fighting weapon to defend yourself, either."

"Fortunate, more than brave. I saw Ahrik crack a couple skulls last night near the big fire. I took a foolish risk."

"I s'pose," Brandr agreed absently while setting himself up on an elbow, facing Craden. "I was wondering if you ever heard of Greylung?"

Craden laid flat on his back. The lad had not forgotten his promise to talk later that night. Sleep would be prolonged for a while. "Aye, lad. I've heard it called Deathcough and Parstanton's Cough too, if I'm thinking of the right thing." He let Brandr nod before proceeding. "Deadly disease, I understand – common for smiths to get it. Parstanton was a famous weapon smith who took eight arrows in five different battles but kept fighting and hammering out the best swords. The Cough finally finished him, though."

"Yeah, that's what I heard too." Brandr's brow furrowed and he shifted under the fur wrap. "That's what I came to talk to the God about. My uncle, Verdon Willberry has Greylung and it's gettin' the better of him."

"Sorry to hear that, Brandr. Real sorry – that's a tough disease to have and to be around." Craden's sympathy was real. He had been friends with a smith who died of Parstanton's Cough, had visited him monthly on his trade route. The old man deteriorated over the course of a half-year before passing.

"I live with Uncle Verdon, work at his forge, and shovel coal for him. I have other uncles in Coalhaven, two of 'em, but I've always liked Verdon the best."

"I hope he makes it." Craden said, feeling a lump form in his throat. He knew the disease always ended the same way.

"Thanks, but I know the disease only ends with death." Tears began rolling down Brandr's cheek. He wiped at the tear with a corner of the bearskin wrap. "I have accepted the fact that I'm probably gonna lose him. But, now there's a chance to ask a God a question. I can't decide what question to ask."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, at first I was going to ask whether there was a cure for Greylung, or how can I help cure my uncle. He's had the local medicine healer give him herb packs, poultices, and chest rubs. Some gave him a little relief from the pain, or slowed the coughs, but nothing stopped the disease. Maybe there is a real cure out there that healers just don't know about."

"That sounds like good thinking, Brandr."

"But now, I wonder if I would just be wasting the question. Maybe, I should ask what I should do when my uncle dies, or where I should go."

"That's a hard decision to make."

Brandr nodded.

"Seems to me that you're the only one who can make it. I would help if I could, but that decision must come from you. As you consider, remember that a chance like this is more rare than a winter daisy. You need to figure out which question you most want answered, should you get the chance to ask it."

Brandr nodded again and lay back on the ground to face the stars. They were quiet for a while... both staring into the night sky. Other men began settling down around them. Eventually, the fire lost its flames, and where logs once blazed, embers glowed and popped in a thick bed. Howls echoed through the mountains from all directions, coming closer to camp. Craden watched the ring of trees around the clearing and expected to see a wolf or something bigger emerge at any time. The aroma of the feast still carried on the breeze. But nothing came.

After a while, Craden said, "Brandr?"

"Uh-huh."

"How many platefuls of goat shank did you down tonight?"

Craden felt the young man's smile without even looking over, and heard it in his voice.

"Four. I finished off the fourth plate. Ahrik ate three and a half, but didn't finish the fourth."

\* \* \*

When the sun emerged over the bare trees to the east, its light glittered across the glen like glass dust. A heavy blanket of frost coated everything save the fire pit. Craden awoke and surveyed the crisp morning, his breath puffing out in white plumes. The attendants moved about the camp, putting half a dozen pots of water on the fire. Craden hoped they would add sufficient herbs to spice the drink and get his blood flowing. Except the attendants, he was the first to rise, but others soon sounded the moan of men who regretted drinking beyond their limits the night before.

Craden rose to stretch the stiffness from his legs and realized that something was different. The glen itself seemed unchanged, but the mountains around appeared closer and larger. That was impossible. He tried to get an attendant's attention to ask him about it, but the man kept walking away as though he had not heard Craden. Curious about what seemed impossible, Craden sat on a boulder near the fire ring and pulled icy boots onto his feet. The socks needed a thorough scrubbing, or a good burning, but Craden had packed light and he would have to make due with gritty socks.

Brandr soon awoke. His dark hair matted to one side of his head; dirt smudged across his forehead; and a sporadic covering of short whiskers defended his chin. Craden instinctively felt his own chin and decided he might have a good start to a beard before this venture ended. A rippling noise behind Craden drew his attention. A stream flowed next to the northern edge of the glen. He had not noticed the stream the night before, although it was possible that the combination of failing daylight and bright campfire together with the loud laughter and conversation had kept him from

noticing it. He doubted that to be true. He was becoming more convinced that they were no longer in the same place they had been when he closed his eyes the night before.

Craden's water skin was nearly empty and Brandr's face needed a washing, so he waited for the young man to pull on his boots and then led him to the gurgling stream. Once out of earshot of the waking camp, Craden said, "I believe we're no longer in the same camp... something happened in the night and we've moved."

Brandr wiped at the corners of his eyes and then looked around. His lips pursed, "I suppose things do look a bit different this morning. But the fire's the same, the wagon and attendants are all here, and the glen seems about like I remember it."

"Yes, that's all true, but do you remember a stream being here last night?"

Brandr thought for a while before shaking his head. "I don't remember it being here. But, I think it's more likely that I just didn't notice it than that the glen was somehow moved while we were sleeping. You think you'd notice something like that."

Craden smiled, "That sounded a little sarcastic, Brandr. I didn't know you had reached the point in your transition into manhood that developed wit. For some reason, I thought a man's voice deepened before his sense of humor came in."

"My voice has deepened," Brandr said defensively.

Craden laughed. "Wash your face and straighten out that robin's nest in your hair. Hopefully we'll get to ask our questions this morning."

"Jedd, Kiegan, and those other two green soldiers from Kemmertir are gone!" Ahrik called out from camp.

Craden turned and saw men moving more quickly through the camp than would be expected considering the amount of drink they swallowed and the crispness of the early morning. He jogged back over, and sure enough, Ahrik was right. There had been twelve men, not counting attendants, the night before and now there were eight.

Ahrik had better luck than Craden in gaining an attendant's attention. Ahrik pinned one against the wagon with his feet a good handspan off the ground. "I'll ask you once, man, where are the other four?"

Stammering, the attendant said, "they're alright. We will tell you the whole... er, story now... We just waited until you were up... That's what we were told... to do." He forced his hands into his robe and pressed a golden scroll in Ahrik's face. It was a match of the scroll posted on the inn.

Ahrik loosened his grip and the man's feet lowered to the trampled grass below. "Let's have it then."

The attendant rubbed his throat as he and the other two ushered the group around the fire. It took little effort on their part as Ahrik had already drawn everyone's attention. When all were settled, the attendant Ahrik confronted opened the scroll and read aloud:

"Congratulations on being selected at the Autumn Solstice. You have all made the journey to Winter's Thimble and thus proven your commitment to this quest. While you slept, you were taken into the heart of the Northern Mountains for the next challenge. Undoubtedly, some from the party were left behind."

Ahrik appeared ready to interrupt the reading, but controlled his temper. The attendant read on, "Only those who were summoned have been brought to this point. Any who came along without invitation, wasted their travel to Winter's Thimble. You may recall that the promise on the golden scroll was, first, that a selection would be made at Autumn Solstice. You know by now that of the thousands who came, you eight were selected. The second part of the promise involves a test of

worthiness. This test begins as you enter the golden shafts of Mount Vestrivail. This time, the attendants have the map. Those who desire to go on shall follow them to the entrance of the shafts. Those who desire to not be tested shall stay in the glen another night and awake in Winter's Thimble on the morrow.

If you choose to proceed and gain your chance to ask your question, you must offer as a sacrifice all of the worldly possessions you carry or travel with, save your weapons."

With that, the attendant rolled up the scroll and put it within the folds of his robe. For a short moment, all were silent. Then, everybody spoke at once. Craden only heard part of what was said by the other men. Ahrik accepted the explanation of where the other men were with a grunt. Craden got the impression that those men were part of Ahrik's patrol or company and were under his command. That explained not only why they had come without summons, but also why Ahrik was so passionate about their disappearance.

The thought that Craden couldn't force out of his mind was the last line of the scroll, the part that said he would have to sacrifice the worldly possessions he carried. He cursed himself for not burying his pack of gold outside of Sendra. As soon as that thought passed, he realized it was foolish. He would never have parted with his pack unless he had known he would have to sacrifice it. No place would have secured the safety of his gold more than being in his pack and slung over his shoulder. Certainly, no one else would have to give up nearly as much as he would. Thoughts of unfairness crept into his mind. Those thoughts led to deliberation over whether he ought to stay behind and go back to his trade route, buy the silk looms, and seek out a wife. All of his thoughts distilled into this choice: Would he give up the chance at financial security and an increased station in life for the chance to ask and have answered the question about his lost soul?

The memory of the dead face of Captain Hallsteinn, and that of his first in command and son, Jorly, gave Craden the answer to that question. Craden had many good years left ahead of him. He could rebuild his trade supply and regain all that he lost. The men of his former company had all of their choices taken away because of him. Knowing the answer to his question was worth more than ten packs of gold. Twenty.

For a while, it appeared that Ahrik and the other soldiers would either head out on their own, take the map from the attendants by force, or simply tell them "no" and sleep the adventure off like a bad hangover. Then, Ahrik led the group to the small covered wagon where the attendants were gathered. Craden had already approached and was advised by the attendant to wait by the wagon. Behind him, a line of men formed. Craden felt Ahrik's hot breath on his neck and smelled ale, goat juices, and sweat coming from him as one-by-one the whole party lined up.

Craden looked over at Brandr, whose expression would have been appropriate had he swallowed a prickle cone and drank pepper juice to soothe the sores. Craden decided he really would have to play the lad bone dice for money. That is, if he ever got enough money to gamble after giving it all to the attendants. He shook his head, wondering what was so hard about the decision for Brandr. As far as Craden could tell, Brandr had very little of value to give away. This should have been an easy test for him. For a fleeting moment, Craden wondered if it was just a test. Perhaps once he proved that he was willing to give up all of the worldly possessions he carried, the attendants would invite him to join the group and let him keep his gold. That turned out to be a foolish hope.

Craden was first in line, and wished that he had let someone else go ahead of him so he could see what the attendants did before he had to talk to them. When called forward, he realized it would not have mattered. The attendant who had read the scroll, a narrow-faced man with a sickly look about his watery blue eyes, whispered to Craden in a voice so low that no other could hear. "Except

for your weapons and clothes, put all of your worldly possessions in the wagon. I will not check you, but if you traveled here with something of value that you do not sacrifice now, you will waste your time going forward.”

The pack felt like it held a millstone as Craden hefted it into the wagon. It made the distinct sound of clinking money as it landed on the wooden floorboards. Craden also deposited a scrollcase and his bedroll, but was told by the attendant that he could keep his waterskin. Craden almost wished that the attendant had wanted the ‘skin as well, which would have given him hope that the journey’s end was near. As Craden walked away, Ahrik gave him a slap on the back. “Hope that wasn’t gold.”

Craden drank the hot, spiced tea given to him by another attendant as he watched the others approach the wagon one at a time. Nothing surprised Craden more than what happened after Ahrik had spoken with the attendant for a while. Ahrik put two fingers in his mouth and whistled three times, short and crisp. Settled near the edge of the trees to the east, a fully armored horse rose and walked over to Ahrik. When the brown and black dappled horse stood next to the wagon, Craden could tell that the animal stood no fewer than fourteen hands high and was very heavily muscled. Then, at Ahrik’s command, the horse walked up a heavy plank into the wagon. It seemed physically impossible for such a large animal to disappear into the small wagon, but nonetheless, it was gone. That the horse was disciplined enough to walk up the plank and into a wagon was impressive in itself. But for the second time on the mission, Craden fully believed a God was involved.

The other soldiers lost horses, which took far more coaxing to get into the wagon. In one case, the soldier applied a heavy dose of Grivenroot stems to calm his nervous gelding before three men pulled him up by the reins.

Earlier, when the attendant said that those who chose to forego the test of worthiness could remain behind, Craden had wondered if someone might stick around and rob the wagon. Clearly, that would not be a problem. Who would dare step into a wagon that swallowed horses? Craden still felt sick about losing all the gold, but after seeing what the other men gave up, he felt a little better.

Craden could not see what Brandr lost, but when the lad walked by, his eyes were red and his expression was solemn. Craden decided the time to talk would come later, if at all.

The path the attendants chose led through a dense evergreen and squareleaf forest to the north. Much of the way followed a meandering stream up a slope. In the early hours, Craden welcomed the times the sunlight peaked through the gaps in the tall trees. By mid-morning, frost turned to dampness on the leaves and blades of greenery lining the path. Pant legs and boots were soon soaked and Brandr complained to Craden that he was getting blisters on both feet. It was the first thing Brandr had said since breaking camp and although Craden was sorry to hear that the young man was developing blisters, he was glad to hear Brandr talking again.

Blisters were an inconvenience of traveling by foot, but riding horses could be just as bad. Craden had developed some tender saddle sores when he rode a horse with Captain Hallsteinn’s company. Yet, if left untreated or kept unclean, blisters could cost a man much more than convenience. A soldier named Duggan had lost a foot because he refused treatment of his blisters in a wet spring campaign near Hatchinburg. Craden remembered Duggan refusing treatment for blisters when other soldiers were hurt in battle. Foolish pride, thought Craden. Duggan’s face haunted Craden like Captain Hallsteinn’s and Jorly’s. He too died in the slaughter at Garborg Alley.

“What’s wrong?” Brandr asked, holding back a wet branch so Craden could get past.

“Nothing.” Craden dismissed the question, trying to make his mouth into a smile.



"You looked a little worried..." Brandr added.

After forcing the painful memories out of his mind, Craden succeeded with his second effort at framing a smile. "I just lost more gold than I had ever owned... guess I may live to regret my choice. Maybe I already do." Craden decided against outright lying to the young man. After all, he did regret losing the gold and maybe this would lead Brandr into opening up.

Brandr nodded, apparently satisfied with Craden's explanation.

"What did you make of the soldiers losing their horses?" Craden asked.

Brandr's eyes lit up. "That was amazing. I've never seen anything like that before."

"Neither have I and I'd wager that after this journey's through, it'll be many a day before we see the likes of that again." Craden relaxed his smile and thought about how to phrase his words. "I thought long and hard before I parted with my gold, but you took a fair bit longer in making your decision. Do you regret it?"

Brandr nodded, but appeared to be thinking over what to say, so Craden gave him time. Craden swatted away a spider web before Brandr walked into it. They were lagging behind the main group, so Craden hurried the pace, walking ahead of Brandr. Finally the young man spoke. "I know what I gave up to come along was of very little value, less than ten silver nickels, I'd imagine. It was a loose triple fold knot on a gold chain that my uncle gave me when I was little."

Craden nodded, still not knowing really what it was that Brandr sacrificed. "If you don't mind my asking, what is a triple fold knot?"

"Oh, I guess someone from outside of Coalhaven might not know. It's the design commonly used to beat steel and make it stronger. It can be used to make armor, chains, and lots of other stuff. It's one of the first lessons my uncle taught me. But that's not why this knot was special."

"I see. Was it because this one was a gift from your uncle that made it hard for you to give it away?"

"Part that, but mostly because my uncle got it from my father, his older brother. It was all I had to remind me of my father. Not that I really even remember him."

"I'm sorry," Craden said. Again, his loss seemed less costly than it had at first.

For a long time, they walked in silence. As the sun rose in the sky, Craden welcomed the sections of trail that ran through the shadows of the great trees. It was not a hot day, but the work of hiking up the rocky, meandering slope made him warm under his coat.

As midday passed into afternoon, the trail ascended a steep, gravel-peppered slope. Switchbacks wore into the grade, but the loose rock made the climb slow and treacherous. Above them, Craden saw a large, dark depression into the mountain. When they reached the opening, several of the men, including all three attendants, bled from scrapes on palms and elbows. As they entered the cave mouth, the men let out audible sighs, dropped to the floor and drew long sips from waterskins.

After they caught their breath and wet their throats, the lead attendant pulled out another scroll and read. "Welcome to the golden shafts of Mount Vestrivail." As he spoke, another attendant lit a lantern to illuminate the dark cave. When its light spilled out, brilliant sparkles and twinkles glistened on the walls like they were coated with golden fire embers. The rock of the cave walls was easily half gold. Craden noticed his jaw was gaping, and closed it as the attendant continued. "As you can see, the mine is aptly named. The wealth of the mountain has attracted many greedy adventurers over the years, and the gods have secluded the place so that their greed did not overcome them. The wealth you have come to seek is information, which may prove to be more valuable than all of the gold around you. Or it may be as worthless as the rough boarstone on the slope below. The

way to your treasure is not with a pick and lantern, but with a stout heart and keen mind. If you prove worthy, your reward shall then be freely given and its value is up to you."

Once the scroll was rolled up and returned to the attendant's robes, the other attendant set the lantern on the floor. Then, the three attendants left. Without further advice, and in the face of a myriad of questions from the soldiers and others about what they were to do next, the attendants disappeared down the rocky slope.

Ahrik was the first to speak. "Never trusted those hose-wearing maidens anyway. I guess we should get going. My stomach growls are beginning to echo." He picked up the lantern and turned to walk into a dark corridor at the rear of the cave.

"Hold a while." Brandr pleaded in an uncertain tone. His boots were off and he was wrapping a strip of tunic cloth around his right foot at the arch. "It'll take me only a minute."

"Forget your hose, lad?" Jitru quipped.

Craden saw Brandr blush and came to his defense. "Maybe you could let him use one of yours, then, Jitru. Of course, it might not fit him in the arse, but maybe he could stuff a basket of rags down the rear to fill them out." Craden attempted a smile to let the others know he was joking, but he could see by the look on Jitru's face that the humor was not well received.

"I like you better without a sense of humor, courier," Jitru seethed.

Gerwin, broad shouldered and holding a heavy sledge, intervened. "What do you all say that we try to get along on this mission? None of us knows what lies ahead, but we'll damn sure face it better together than on our own."

The moment was tense until Ahrik broke it with a hearty laugh. "I remember your first march, Jitru. You had fewer blisters than the lad has, but you cried about them like you'd taken a boar tusk to the groin. We can wait a minute."

Jitru huffed his discontent, but said nothing once Ahrik had spoken.

Gold flecks glimmered in the lantern light like constellations in the night sky. Where the flecks became denser, excavated cavities pocked the walls and in some cases smaller side tunnels branched off to follow what may have once been a ribbon of gold. The floor was smooth from heavy use, but Craden estimated that use ended long ago. The deeper they went, the colder it became. When they stopped for a drink of water and to catch their breath, the silence was thick and the air was stale. Craden had never been underground before, but with the low ceiling, the tunnel reminded him of a tomb. He could not tell how much time had passed since they had entered the mine, but more than one stomach growled in the silence. Craden knew it had been too long since they had a meal.

"Is that a light ahead?" Erlak, an owl faced man with an easy manner, asked. Craden had only heard him speak a few times, but had correctly guessed that Erlak was a struman, an easy determination based on the richness and control of his voice.

"Aye, it is," Ahrik said, sure of himself.

Another growl echoed in the dark tunnel and Brandr murmured something about hoping supper waited ahead.

As the group proceeded down the tunnel, Craden could see that the light ahead came from a larger cavern, and that something big was in the cavern. Ahrik led the group, but he halted them before they reached the opening, hooded the lantern and gestured for the others to be quiet. Ahead on the wall was a scroll.

Brandr was about to walk forward to look at the scroll when Ahrik grabbed him by the shoulder and pointed ahead to a huge dark shape moving in the lighted cavern beyond.

After Craden's eyes adjusted to the light, he could see that the thing moving about was a wolf. The animal was as tall as Ahrik's horse, impossibly big and powerful. It sniffed the air, sensing the group was near, but it was in a lit cavern and was not able to see them in the dark. Clanking echoed loudly into the tunnel and Craden could see the source of the noise. The huge wolf was staked to the cavern floor with a chain. The links were as big as a man's head and the iron as thick as Craden's wrist. He could not imagine the weight of the chain, but the wolf moved without much hindrance as it searched for the source of the smell.

Hugging against the wall, a slender soldier who Craden had not yet met made his way to the scroll, retrieved it and handed it to Ahrik. Ahrik positioned himself with his back to the cavern and granted a sliver of lantern light to the scroll while Jitru kept watch of the wolf. From the noise of the chain, Craden could tell the animal was on the far side of the cavern. Ahrik read aloud in a shallow, gravel-like voice.

With it, a hard heart may be softened.  
Without it, noise and chaos may overwhelm.  
By it, peace and joy may be obtained.  
Its source may be a child, a bird, or the wind.  
Its home may be a tavern, a church, or a riverbank.  
By it, a tree sprite may obtain her prey.  
Its home may be a heart, a mind, or an idea.  
Its source may be practiced or learned, but not imposed.  
By it, a beast may calm and settle.  
Without it, the spring flowers would not bloom.  
With it, the glories of nature unfold.

"Read it again." Erlak asked.

Craden heard the wolf's chain nearer to their tunnel. Holding up a hand, he cocked his head to indicate that the group should retreat to discuss the scroll. After they traveled to where they could no longer hear the chain, and were certain their light could not be seen, Ahrik released the hood. Light bathed the faces of the group and Craden saw an interesting array of expressions. Ahrik exuded confidence. He, Craden thought, would be an easy man to follow into battle. Erlak appeared perplexed, as did Brandr. Gerwin looked almost amused, but his right hand gripped the haft of his heavy hammer tightly enough to leave the tip of each knuckle white.

Ahrik read the scroll two more times. He took a long time on each line, rereading and pausing when asked. Then, the scroll was passed around to those who could read. Craden was able to read through the words three times, but his mind could not grasp any answer to the puzzle that fit with every line. At first, he thought of love. Certainly love softened a heart and could be found in church. But, he could not see how love could be used by a sprite to catch her prey. Perhaps the sprite made her prey fall in love and thereby caught it. No. Infatuation maybe, but not love. Other ideas sprang to mind and were quickly shot down: power, might, and guile were all close, but not quite a clean fit.

Craden wanted to read the words another time, but Brandr had not had a chance to look at the scroll and he had waited patiently. At the young man's request, Craden handed the parchment to him. By the way Brandr looked at the writing, Craden could tell he was not able to read.

"I wager the answer to the riddle is the key to getting past the beast," Erlak said.

"Aye." Most of the group agreed.

"I trust tricks and riddles less than I trust steel." Ahrik said, drawing everyone's attention. "If I had Lekue, our marksman from the Red Company, he'd down the beast with an arrow and we'd walk past without straining our heads. Any of you have a bow?"

Craden looked around and saw no other bowmen, but his would not do and it would be worthless to even mention it.

"He has a bow," Brandr offered in a voice dripping with eagerness to be accepted, pointing at Craden.

Craden blushed as every man looked at him. He pulled out his weapon and coughed. "I do, and if the beast were a rabbit, I'd have it spitted for dinner in a minute. But, as you can see, I couldn't pierce that monster's hide, let alone his heart, with this."

Ahrik squinted at the bow. "'Tis a toy for a child."

Brandr looked apologetically at Craden. Craden wanted to be mad at the young man, but he could not. Brandr was just trying to help. Besides, energy wasted on blame would do nothing to help them get past the wolf. Craden smiled reassuringly at Brandr and set his mind back to work on the riddle.

Gerwin, who had been silent for a long time, spoke up. "Seems to me, we need to figure out the riddle anyway. If this is a test the God has set up, I think we'll need to find the right answer to prove ourselves. I don't think a God would tell us to knock at the front door and be just as happy to see us after we snuck in the back."

The others seemed to agree with that, and ideas about answers were bantered about for a time.

Silence, Craden thought. The answer might be silence. He recalled an old child's story that turned on a riddle, where the answer was silence. But that was a different riddle, and he was not sure "silence" fit all of the clues to this riddle. It felt close, but not quite right. He wanted to read the scroll again, but it was still making another round and Erlak had it.

As Craden looked at Erlak, the owl-faced man looked up from the scroll, as if feeling Craden's gaze, and said, "music." The group kept talking, so Erlak said it again, louder. "Music. I think the answer is music."

This time, the group stopped talking and gave Erlak their attention. Erlak, his rich voice low so as not to carry too far down the tunnel, explained. "Most of the clues are vague enough that any number of things could apply. But, the line about the tree sprite is the key. Some sprites use song to draw in their prey."

Ahrik added, "It can certainly be practiced or learned. I had a boy learn the horn to call us into battle. The lad had never put brass to his lips, but by the end of a week of practice, he could pipe out a battle song like a veteran."

"And I had a lass once take me to a mountainside one spring for roll in the dew. She said the flowers in the spring were musical and the hills sang," Jitru surprised everyone by saying.

Ahrik gave his companion a shocked look. "You have a poet's heart, Jit. Maybe you could write a song about the lass." That brought a round of uneasy laughter.

"Maybe we should check under his tunic for hose," Craden suggested.

Jitru only blushed deeper as the laughter rang out. A howl from down the tunnel told them they had let themselves get a little too loose.

"The attendants took my lute and lyre," Erlak said in a hush. "But, they didn't take my voice." He sang out the first verse of Moon on the Beartree. Craden always liked the deep melody of

the song, and Erlak sang it well.

Kjartan, the slender soldier who had retrieved the scroll, was sent to get a better look at the cavern and upon his return a plan was put together. The wolf was chained to the center of a large, round cavern and it looked like the chain would allow the beast to reach both sides. The group decided that Ahrik and Jitru would accompany Erlak along the north wall, around the cavern and to the other side, where a tunnel continued on. Erlak's song should protect them, but if it failed, the soldiers' steel would. If they made it safely, then they would return and the whole group would go together.

At first, the other soldiers insisted that they go along too, as did Gerwin. However, Craden agreed with Ahrik that the wolf was too dangerous and a small group would have a better chance of escaping if the plan did not work. Craden had little doubt that it was Ahrik's ax and word that settled the matter more than his own words, but he was glad to agree with the man for once. Craden felt like their group was beginning to come together. A challenge could do that for a group. It could also drive them apart.

The cavern was lit with torches on sconces set into the walls every twenty feet. In the flickering light, the great wolf sat watching them. It did not rise up, or growl. It just watched, like it was waiting for them to come too close. The size and look of the beast sent chills down Craden's back and he wanted to turn and leave.

Then, Erlak began to sing. "Gravy on the Biscuit, Butter on the Bun." It had a soothing melody, which had helped many weary children drift to sleep in their beds. Almost instantly, the wolf yawned a great yawn. Teeth as big as hammer picks gaped wide enough to fit around a boar's head. Craden shuddered. Then, the wolf lay down and rested its head on ham-sized paws. Its gray and black fur shook as it settled itself. After another yawn, the yellow eyes closed and soon the great belly heaved with slow, steady breaths.

Erlak sang as Ahrik led the struman and Jitru along the northern wall. Ahrik held his ax with both hands, but it looked far less intimidating with the enormous wolf lying in the center of the cavern. Jitru wielded a basket-hilted sword with one hand and held a shield with the other. The small group moved along the wall without any problems as Erlak's wonderful voice rang out and echoed off the cavern walls and ceiling. Brandr smiled at Craden; it was a mixture of joy and nervousness.

When the group was at the midpoint of the north wall, Craden noticed a yellow eye open and he grabbed Brandr's arm. Erlak was still singing, but the wolf was awake. It was guise, a horrible deception. Brandr yelped in surprise and then cried out in horror as the wolf sprang from the ground and bounded toward the group. The heavy chain raked the cavern floor behind it. Ahrik yelled to run and they sprinted ahead toward the tunnel opening. But they were too slow. The great wolf bounded like a deer to cut off their path and force them to fight or retreat. Jitru pulled Erlak behind him and met the wolf at Ahrik's side.

The wolf loomed over the men, fangs bared and fur raised. Its growl made Craden nearly wet himself. Ahrik called for a retreat, but Gerwin and the soldiers began to run out to meet the others and help fight the wolf. Brandr ran out as well. Before they cleared the tunnel, the wolf had Jitru cut off from Ahrik. The wicked ax carved into the wolf's hind flank, but the beast was too strong. Jitru was crushed by the weight of the animal. It swung its head to face Ahrik; the ax got its attention, but was unable to sever the rod-like tendon Ahrik had aimed for. The force of the wolf's head knocked Ahrik to the ground, but he rolled to his feet. "Thorad!" he yelled as he engaged to the wolf with a fury. Craden remembered Thorad was Ahrik's son.

Gerwin and the other soldiers ran forward with weapons drawn, but Ahrik called out to

them. "Get across. Get across." His ax gashed the wolf's snout and blood began to dribble from its nose. Yet, it was an impossible fight.

First, Erlak heeded Ahrik and began to run to the tunnel opening. The wolf turned to cut him off, but Ahrik anticipated the move and caught the wolf in the ribs with his ax. He would not let the wolf break free.

Craden froze with fear. Captain Hallsteinn's face flashed in his mind. The scene of soldiers dying and the guilt he felt for their deaths overcame him, nailed him to the floor. Forcing the fear away like the darkness with a lantern. He ran into the cavern.

Brandr turned when he saw Craden go, paused for but a second, and then ran with him.

The wolf saw the others running through the cavern and growled and turned to them. Ahrik's right leg bore a glistening wound and he moved slower, but he cut at the wolf's legs whenever it diverted its attention from him. Kjartan reached the wolf and cut at its hind quarters with a long sword. Kjartan's courage exceeded where his skill failed. The wolf wheeled and gashed the young soldier's chest with a snap of its jaws. Kjartan went sprawling.

"Get out of here," Ahrik bellowed, swinging his ax into the spinning creature. Then, he was down. Only Gerwin and the other young soldier remained. Before the wolf could reach them, Jitru somehow managed to regain his feet. Blood ran freely from his mouth, but he drove his sword into the wolf's flank. It turned to finish him off.

Gerwin and the other soldier grabbed Kjartan by the arms and dragged him toward the far tunnel. Craden and Brandr helped pull him along. Jitru was already dead. Craden saw the wolf's head rise, blood dripping from its snout, and turn on them. They would not reach the opening with Kjartan. Craden wanted to run, leave the others behind. But he did not. They lifted Kjartan by his arms and legs and hurried toward the tunnel. Kjartan cried out in pain and the group nearly faltered, but they continued.

Again, it was Ahrik who saved them. His ax was knocked too far away, but he scrambled to his feet and grabbed hold of the wolf's muzzle as it tried to push past him. Ahrik held fast, like a kitten carried over water. The wolf bit into him and shook him to break free. Ahrik was broken and thrown aside, but his sacrifice saved the others. Erlak sobbed loudly as the rest of them fell into the tunnel opening. The wolf charged ahead, but the chain snapped its neck back before it reached them. Blood dripped from its fangs as it tugged at the chain.

Kjartan moaned as the others pulled him farther down the tunnel, into the darkness, and away from the wolf.

Craden could not remember ever having seen such valor and courage. His heart ached for men he hardly knew, for men who would have spilled his blood the night before. He would never forget Ahrik and Jitru. Their faces would remain in his mind and perhaps haunt him. Like Captain Hallsteinn's. Like Jorly's and Duggan's. No, not like those. Craden was not responsible for Ahrik's and Jitru's deaths. The God was responsible for that. He wondered what God would allow men to die so horribly. No, perhaps they had just hastened to the wrong answer and had they spent more time on the riddle, Ahrik and Jitru might not have lost their lives. Craden wanted to read the riddle again and see what they missed. Erlak had it last, but this was not the time.

At least they had saved Kjartan. Although painful, Kjartan's injuries were not deep. The wolf must have just grazed him. By tearing Kjartan's coat into strips, Gerwin was able to bind the wounds and slow the bleeding. Craden gave the young soldier his own coat when the young man began to shiver. At Kjartan's pace, the group traveled slowly, but at least Kjartan was able to walk. Unfortunately, they were out of water. Gerwin had insisted on washing the wound before dressing

it, and he used most of the water to do that. The rest of the water was shared over the course of hours as the group made slow progress down dark, cold, endless tunnels.

The mood had been somber at the loss of Ahrik and Jitru, but as time passed and the men went deeper into the mountain without food or water, despair set in.

"Maybe we should go back," Brandr suggested. "Get out of this mountain."

Craden snapped a little more harshly than he intended, "And how do we get past the wolf this time?" He knew it was the wrong thing to say.

"Easy," Gerwin said. With Ahrik gone, Gerwin had assumed the role as leader of the group. He carried the lantern and had rationed out the water.

"I'm sorry," Craden added. "I wish we could go back, but I can't see how to do that, now."

"What kind of a God would put us through something like that?" Brandr asked to no one in particular.

"Maybe we just got the answer wrong," Erlak responded. His rich voice seemed a little hollow. "Maybe it isn't the God's fault, but mine. I was the one who thought I knew so much. I wanted to have the right answer and be the one to take us safely across."

"No, we all thought your idea was the right one," Gerwin said kindly.

Erlak appeared to want to say more, but tears slipped from the corners of his eyes and they continued into the darkness.

Kjartan slowed down, his pain increased by the exertion, and the group deliberated over whether to stop and rest before moving on. Gerwin took a count of those who wanted to keep going, and at first, the group trudged ahead. Then, Erlak wearied and told the others that he thought they should rest. Just then, they saw a glimmer of light ahead. A little farther down, the tunnel forked and between the twin paths was a thick stone door that rested open. A pale light seeped out from the chamber beyond.

A melodic, woman's humming beckoned from within, but more enticing yet were the smells of cooked meat, sweet pies, and freshly baked bread. Craden wondered if he was imagining the whole thing. But from the smiles on the other men's faces, he knew he was not the only one. He was wary that it might be a trap, but he could feel the warmth coming from behind the door and longed to enter. "It could be a trap," Craden warned.

"One that I don't think I'll resist," said Brandr.

The group edged closer and the humming woman emerged from the chamber. Her golden hair was gathered in a hundred braids and tied in silver ribbons. A stained apron covered an elegant blue velvet dress. Craden thought that she'd look better in silk, but in the chill of the mountain, velvet was a better choice. "Welcome to the heart of the mountain." She beckoned. "Come, warm yourselves and sup at my table."

The chamber was decorated with tall golden candle stands set throughout the large hall on the floor and tables. In the center of the room, a huge silver chandelier holding hundreds of slender white candles hung over a large, round table. Six other tables ringed around the outside. More gorgeous than the gold and silver was what sat on the table. Roast goose, beef, and whitefish surrounded by potatoes, yams, and puddings, and crowded with apple tarts, meat and nut pies, and kettles of stew yielded such an array of wonderful smells that Craden had no doubt that they had reached heaven. He wondered if the beautiful woman was the God... Nossa, perhaps, or Idunn.

The six tables ringing the center table each had a single place setting and a gilded chair. At the far end of the room were six pallets. Everything in the chamber looked perfect. For a moment, Craden forgot Ahrik and Jitru. Then, upon remembering them and seeing that only six places were

set, a feeling of guilt surged through him.

The woman closed the door and asked if she could speak a few words before the men helped themselves.

"You have been selected and thus far proven worthy, but your quest is not yet complete. You have suffered loss and hardship, but you have persevered. This place shall be but a rest for you, and soon your questions may all be answered. So consider the purposes your quests and celebrate together. I cannot answer any specific questions, but I will share all that you see before you. Eat to your content, so that you do not return hungered. Now choose a table as your own and load your plates high."

Craden and Gerwin helped Kjartan to one of the six tables and Craden asked what Kjartan would like to eat. The others had all heaped plates full of food before Craden was able to get a plate for himself. As he surveyed the table, he could not even see a dent in the feast from the other men's indulgence.

Craden caught the woman's eye and she smiled at him. He pondered her words and a strange thought occurred to him. Perhaps this was not a break, but was another test. What had she said? "Eat to your content, so you do not return hungered." Was that it? Did it mean anything, or was he just muddle-minded. He decided he would think more clearly after a good meal and a long drink. Not too long, and only of the juices, not the wine.

Craden chose a beef, potato, and carrot stew to start his meal. It was delicious, plenty of pepper and a nice thick broth. He could not remember a better tasting stew, but hunger had a way of seasoning food. When Craden finished the stew, he decided to have a second helping before trying the game hen or the cobbler. The table was loaded with all kinds of food, but after checking each kettle three times, he could not find the stew. The other men must have liked it as well as he did.

Erlak excused himself as he reached past Craden for a helping of steaming rolls; butter glazed the bread and glistened from the owl-faced man's fingers as he drew back a second and third roll. Brandr heaped spoonfuls of two puddings and garlic-laced potatoes while Craden watched on. Brandr told Gerwin that the game hen was the best he ever had and encouraged the older man to try some. When Gerwin said he would, Brandr could not find the place where the game hen had been; though Craden saw him walk right past it.

"Here it is," Craden interjected.

Gerwin smiled and filled his plate with four hens and a mound of carrots.

"Were's the roast goose?" Brandr asked, his plate already filled to near capacity.

Craden surveyed the table and saw a platter of goose in the center of the table, "Over here, Brandr." He indicated where the platter of goose sat.

Brandr came over and looked right where Craden had pointed. "I don't see it."

"You're looking right at it," Craden said.

Brandr squinted, and shook his head. "Really, I don't see anything."

Craden reached out and picked up a forkful of sliced goose, its juices dripping as he offered the serving to Brandr.

The young man laughed. "Funny. Shall I pretend to get so full that my sides burst?"

"What do you mean?" Craden asked. The other men ate contentedly at their tables.

Brandr, seeing Craden's confused look, stopped laughing. "Craden, has your mind withered from starvation? There's nothing on your fork."

"I think all is not as it seems, Brandr." Craden's mind raced back to the words the woman spoke.



"You mean, you see food on your fork?"

"Aye. It's two thick, juicy slabs of goose."

"Maybe you should eat it then," Brandr suggested. "It's very good. Besides, there's plenty of food I do see."

Gerwin, having overheard Craden and Brandr, rose and joined them. "I think Craden's right. Something unusual is going on here."

Brandr's voice quivered. "Well if the woman wanted to poison us, we sure fell for it."

Craden shook his head. "No, if anything, I think this might be another test, but I don't see how. Maybe the test is to see who eats himself so sick that he is no longer able to journey on."

"Maybe it's a contest and whoever eats everything on the table wins," Brandr suggested.

"With you, every meal is a contest," Craden said.

Gerwin looked around and located the woman on the far side of the room, tending to the pallets. "What do you think we ought to do?"

It felt good to have his opinion requested, but Craden had no astute plans to offer, or even a workable analysis of the problem. "I guess we cautiously finish our dinner, rest the night, but only with a full rotation of watch set, and then head down the tunnel in the morning."

Gerwin and Brandr both nodded, and they all returned to their tables. With his hunger appeased, Craden thought through the unusual circumstances they enjoyed. He found it strange that each man had his own table. Maybe the trick with the food was the reason for them being divided. He also tried to remember the woman's words. Parts of what she said were as vague as the clue on the scroll. Failing to figure out those clues had cost two good men their lives. She did not appear to be as dangerous as the wolf, but Craden remembered a woman or two who had looked innocent enough who turned out to be very dangerous. His mind was slowing and sleep suddenly seemed like the best idea he could muster. It was impossible to tell how much time had passed since they had entered the mountain, but his body longed to lie on a pallet.

Kjartan's head rested on his table and his cuff soaked gravy from the otherwise empty plate beside him. Craden and Gerwin helped him to a pallet and lowered him onto the thick blankets and fresh straw. Brandr's conversation would have to wait until morning, Craden thought as he claimed his own pallet in the corner. The idea for setting a watch was a fine one, but one that failed. Before long, all of the men joined snores in a rowdy chorus.

The woman must have extinguished most of the candles because when Craden awoke, the room was dimly lit. She was gone. He saw the other men sleeping soundly. His body warned that it wanted more sleep, but complained about the unfamiliar conditions. Nonetheless, he drifted back to sleep.

The next time he awoke, Erlak and Gerwin were whispering at one of the six tables. Quietly, he rose and walked over to join the conversation. The round table was still full of food, and as far as Craden could tell, all of the food was just as it had been the night before. The game hens still steamed enticingly, but the heavy indulging he had done left little capacity for breakfast. Maybe he would have lunch.

"We're in trouble." Gerwin told Craden as he approached.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Our plan to leave this morning might not work."

Craden's brow wrinkled, "Why?"

Gerwin gestured to the walls. "We've lost our door."

Erlak scowled in frustration. "We've inspected the walls carefully and can find no sign of

where the door may have been. We think it was over here." He indicated with a nod.

"Yet, there's nothing there. No gap in the stones. No hollow sounds beyond."

Craden's breath felt short. "Any sign of the woman?"

"No," Gerwin answered.

"Have you told Erlak about the food, Gerwin?"

"Aye. But that's another thing that makes no sense. The food's still hot, and I can't tell that it has been changed since last night."

Craden went over to the table and confirmed with his own eyes what Gerwin had just told him. Turning to Erlak and Gerwin, he asked, "How full does the table look to you both?"

"Bout half full," Erlak estimated.

"Little more than half," Gerwin said. "And for you?"

"Mostly full. I think I must have been about as tired as I was hungry last night." Craden thought he ought to be concerned about the food, but the missing door was a much more pressing concern. He decided it must have been a concealed door from this side, and careful inspection should disclose it.

By then, Kjartan had awoken and sat upright on his pallet, arms stretching and then quickly hugging his side. The bindings over his wounds bore mostly dried blood, but a glisten of fresh red along his right side concerned Craden. "Lay down, Kjartan. Let us clean your wound dressings." By the look on Kjartan's face, he would offer little resistance.

Gerwin, Erlak, and Craden worked together to cautiously remove the stained cloth from Kjartan's wounds and soak them in a basin they found under the round table, which Erlak had filled with water. Craden was about to rip a blanket into strips as new bindings when the woman appeared.

"You can use the clean table dressings from that shelf." The woman offered and pointed to a short shelf that held folded cloth, several pints of oil, and a stack of candles.

Craden wished that he had seen her come into the room. He looked back and saw no door opening. Perhaps after they had attended to Kjartan, he would get the answers he wanted. From the look on Gerwin's face, Craden guessed he was of a similar mind. "Thank you, ma'am," Craden said, but it was Erlak who retrieved the cloth and tore it into strips.

The woman waited behind the men, watching them take care of Kjartan, and as they finished, she asked if she could dispose of the soiled cloth and replace the basin.

"Aye, and thank you for doing it," Gerwin said. "But, I'd like to speak a bit, if you're of the mind to talk?"

The woman smiled. "I will speak while I clean the dishes from last night." She removed the soiled rags from the basin, rinsed it clean, and then added water from a bucket.

As she began her work, Craden thought she looked a little plainer than she had the night before. Of course, the lighting was different and shadows flickered as one of the lamps guttered with failing oil. She was still beautiful, golden hair hanging in braids, and wearing a well-fitted black velvet dress. Gerwin retrieved a handful of dirty platters and slipped them into the basin. Craden stood nearby, content to let Gerwin do the talking.

"Who are you?" Gerwin asked. Then, apparently remembering his manners, he added, "Pardon the ingratitude. My name is Gerwin Naplestedt, and I'm pleased to meet you. May I know your name?"

The woman smiled, "Glad to know you, Gerwin. Call me Aleh."

Dishes were passed through the water, dried and stacked under the large round table. Gerwin

helped as the woman hummed. "Aleh, it appears our companions are all awake. Soon we shall need to proceed with our journey. We have greatly appreciated your hospitality, and the food was delicious."

Aleh's smile continued, but her words belied the expression, "I'm sorry, but you will need to stay longer."

"Why?"

"I'm only given instruction that you shall remain in this room for a time."

"How long?" Gerwin's hands stopped working the towel over the dishes.

"I cannot say. It shouldn't be long, though." She handed a clean platter to Gerwin, which he accepted.

"And what if the time comes when we can stay no longer?"

"Then, it shall be a sad day, for this is part of the test." Aleh made it clear that she was finished talking about that subject. The dishes were soon done, and conversation with her ebbed. She worked about the room, straightening pallets and keeping fresh candles on stands and oil in lamps.

As time dragged on, Craden and the others made a full, if not casual, inspection of the room. No one found the door or any other way to escape. The only crevice in the room was a slight crack in the high ceiling, which sucked in a wandering drift of smoke from the candles and lamps. Inventory was taken of how much food each person saw on the table. No one saw as much as Craden.

"I see three bowls of bread, a plate of smoked fish, two kettles of stew, and a spice cake." Brandr said. The conversation paused and the men looked at him.

"How many platefuls did you eat, lad?" Gerwin asked.

"Six. I tried as many things as I could eat. Who knew when we would eat again in this mountain, right?" Brandr must have felt unsure with all the attention.

"That's good thinking, Brandr," Craden confirmed. He felt sick for the boy and responsible for whatever adversity would visit the young man with the hollow trunk.

After several hours, some of the men, including Brandr, were ready for another meal. They had decided to limit the number of dishes each man would eat as it was uncertain when they would get out. Brandr complained about only having one plateful of bean stew, but he relented when reminded of how hungry he had been the night before.

"Night?" Erlak asked. He, Gerwin, and Craden stood around while the younger men ate.

"I guess you lose track of time in the underground," Gerwin acknowledged.

"It won't matter whether it's day or night until we reach the surface again," Craden added. "And that doesn't appear likely to happen any time soon."

Kjartan was the first to put his fork down. He took short steps across the room and lay back down on his pallet.

Craden walked over and sat down on an adjacent pallet. "Is your side bothering you?"

"Not really. Maybe a little." He closed his eyes, but added, "I'm just resting because there's not much to do. You can talk if you like."

"Rough journey, eh?"

"Aye."

"You're a soldier, aren't you, Kjartan?"

"Yeah. Me and Stenn both."

Craden realized he had never heard the other young man's name. He reproved himself for traveling this far with people and not finding out more about them. It appeared that he would have

his chance to learn as much as the others were willing to tell. "What company and where have you served?"

"Kimbatton's Gray Patrol. We were too poor to buy horses, so we drew foot patrol, Stenn and I." Kjartan grimaced as he adjusted his legs on the pallet. "Red Cauldron Lake was our post. We patrolled the shore."

"That's a wooded lake, isn't it? And fair sized, too?" Craden knew the area well. He was sent to receive information from the post commander, Jorgad Rints, by Captain Hallsteinn on three occasions. The memories this conversation stirred were not pleasant.

"Aye. Most of the company spent time clearing the wood from the shoreline this past summer. Snows will fall up there any day now and most of us were sent home for the winter."

"I guess that's better than freezing in a run-down shack."

"Could have used the pay."

"That's understandable. See any combat?" Craden thought better of having asked the question as it left his lips. It was a personal question. One he would not want to answer himself.

"Not 'til yesterday." Kjartan's eye squeezed tighter and moisture seeped through his lashes.

"Hard business with that wolf." Craden felt his chest tighten, but held onto the idea that he would only embarrass the young man more if he expressed any emotion. He would suppress those memories too. Just like he had with Captain Hallsteinn.

"I wasn't much help to anyone. Least of all, Ahrik and Jitru."

"You can't think that way. All we can do is make the best decision time and our instincts allow. Your instincts were valiant. They took you to face the danger and meet it straight on."

"Soakin' lot of good that did."

"You did better than I. I had to force my feet to even step into the chamber. And when I did, I ran as fast as I could to avoid harm and get myself to safety. I did less to help Ahrik and Jitru than you did." It hurt to say that, but it was the truth. Craden looked away as Kjartan's tears ran down his cheeks.

Kjartan wiped at the tears with a sleeve and left his arm covering his eyes. "They're dead and I'm not. They fought well, held their own with the wolf for at least a short while. Why should they get killed and I get away?"

"Fate chooses. It must have been their time." Then a thought occurred to Craden, and he lowered his voice reverently to share it. "They died fighting with honor and will earn their seat at the Gods' feast. In a way, Ahrik will get his question answered. He wanted to know if his son died well in battle. Now, he'll find out."

This seemed to lift Kjartan's spirits a little. "I guess you're right."

"And I'll wager, if Thorad is anything like his father, he'll be there waiting to greet Ahrik."

That brought a weak smile to Kjartan's face. But, it was a smile.

Later, when Craden sat down to eat, he felt guilty for all of the choices he had. If he paced himself he could eat every day for more than a month. After eating, some of the men were talking, but he felt like spending some time with the riddle on the scroll. Erlak retrieved it for him, and Craden lay down on his pallet. The smell of wool and straw were comforting and his eyes had only covered the words two full times when he drifted off to sleep.

The next few days moved slowly by, with more conversation and a growing sense of anticipation. Erlak began entertaining the group with stories. He turned out to be a fair storyteller and was well on his way to becoming a fine struman. Brandr began spending time with Gerwin, talking about smithing, but each night, he lay next to Craden and talked until Craden's snores stopped him.

Craden preferred to sleep as soon as his head rested, but Brandr's long conversation was less of an inconvenience than it had been the first night in Winter's Bowl. Craden spent many of his waking hours studying the scroll. It became a near obsession, but try as he did, he could not solve the riddle.

After several more days had passed, Craden became quite concerned about Brandr, who was almost out of food. Brandr decided to not eat the seventh day and spread his two remaining dishes out over four days. Seeing Brandr suffer made Craden feel even worse about eating his own meals.

The group had tried on more than one occasion to share food, but that proved pointless. No one else could see or taste the food off another's fork. Trying to share made Craden wonder if they were even getting any nutrition or if it was all an illusion. Yet, his stomach felt full after every meal and he had even used the commode every day. Aleh cleaned that along with everything else in the chamber.

Although she was an efficient worker, Aleh seemed to change more each day. Her pleasant demeanor, which was so inviting on the first day, slowly lost its warmth. In addition to her personality changes, her skin and hair paled to a near ivory white. Those physical changes were unusual. Yet, equally unusual was how she came and went. Nobody ever saw her leave, and for the previous five days, the group had made a concerted effort to keep watch of her. They planned to leave the same way she did, but the woman was very adept at disappearing without being seen.

Craden was assisting Gerwin replace Kjartan's bandages, and was thinking of how well the wounds were healing, when Aleh came into view. He had talked to her before, but the time had come to be more serious.

Walking over to the woman, Craden waved to catch her attention. "Can we talk for a little while?"

She appeared tired and frustrated. "I suppose, but there's lots of work to be done here."

Craden could see that the room was a little messy, but it did not need as much attention as her mood suggested. With Gerwin and Erlak busy attending to Kjartan and Brandr and Stenn otherwise occupied, Craden pulled her to where no other would overhear the conversation. "When is this going to end?"

"When is what going to end?"

Craden believed she knew what he meant and did not want to play games. "You know what I mean. Us being trapped in this room."

The innocence that he first took for granted in her had somehow worn away with the passing days. Her eyes belied intelligence and cunning. Her appearance seemed unnatural, but not in any specific way. "I honestly don't know."

"I have trouble believing that." By the hurt look in her eye, he second guessed his assessment of her and wondered if she was telling the truth.

"I follow a set of instructions, and have no control over how long you remain."

"Do your instructions say what must happen for us to leave?"

"Yes."

Craden was not expecting that answer, even if it was the truth. "Is there something we have to accomplish, a puzzle to be solved, what?"

"I cannot say. I've given you all the instructions I am allowed to give."

Craden was more frustrated than angry, but it would be hard to distinguish from the edge on his tongue. "Some of us are nearly out of food. Kjartan is healing, but still not fully well and he has only a little food left. His health will be compromised if he runs out."

A genuine look of sorrow settled in her eyes. "I'm aware. I hope you realize that your sacrifices, however hard to bear, shall prove your mettle. The reward at the end of the road may be a great one indeed. Only a worthy soul may enter the presence of a God." Her expression of concern firmed into resolve.

Craden had spent much time figuring out how to word his question, but now, he wondered how a test that cost men their lives could be worth taking and what kind of a God would require it. In the end, there was little that could be done. Once they had accepted the terms in Winter's Thimble, they were not given an option to quit. Quitting was certainly not an option in this room. Unless one decided to quit living. No, Craden's time and effort would be better served trying to figure out what must be done before the group would be allowed out.

Later that day, Craden told the others about his conversation with Aleh and they all set to trying to figure out what must be accomplished before they could leave. Craden still spent time on the scroll, wondering if figuring out that riddle would help him solve the present one. The problem with being stuck in the room was that there were no written words to ponder. All they had was their collective recollection of what Aleh had said that first night and the ongoing circumstances of the room.

A few days later, Brandr was the first to run out of food. He announced what the others had all known, the seven plates of bread he feasted upon that evening was the last of his food. He conjectured, "Perhaps the test is finishing all the food. Perhaps we'll wake up tomorrow and the door will be open. For me at least."

Craden thought Brandr was being optimistic, or maybe just scared and trying to say something to make himself feel better. "Mayhap you're right, Brandr. If you are, we shall put this hall behind us and go find the God." Craden wanted to give the young man hope, but not false hope.

"Or maybe," Brandr's fear put a shake in his words, "we all have to finish our food."

"Perhaps," Craden responded, again thinking that Brandr was grasping for a solution. Even if Brandr was right, he could not imagine that the others would deplete their supplies of food for such a risk. If he understood people, even the good men with whom he was imprisoned, their desires for self preservation would lead them to hold out for themselves as long as possible... like a dog paddling in the center of a great sea with no hope of reaching the shore. They would each do all they could to keep their heads above water for as long as possible.

Over the course of days, the men had established the custom of sitting on the pallets together as a group and talking after dinner. It had begun with Erlak's story telling, but it had expanded to an event in which all participated. All except Craden. The other men had told quite a bit about themselves, but Craden had kept his history private. None pried, or inquired, but it became clear that Craden had kept himself aloof from the group.

That night, after Brandr finished his last meal from the great table, Gerwin stood and made a suggestion. "Perhaps the answer to the riddle is that we have to come together as a group. I recall something Aleh said when we first entered this hall... about considering the purposes of our quests and celebrating together. We've gotten to know each other quite well these past days, but the questions that brought us to Sendra Downs in the first place, which many openly discussed that first night, have remained buried. I think tonight we should share our full purposes in coming with each other."

Craden's throat swelled with a lump. He thought Gerwin might very well be right. Maybe that was the key to getting out of the room, but he did not know if he could tell the full measure of his purpose. Some dark secrets are not for sharing, he thought. Still, the other men agreed that

Gerwin's suggestion was wise and they settled to listen to what Gerwin had to say.

Gerwin began, "For ten years, ending three years prior to last summer, I was a weaponsmith for the Kordeac Fleet under Willek White Beard. His fleet was mercenary, but had some loyalties to the mainland and never hired to any opposing it. Yet, Willek's reputation as a pirate is not unfounded. He came across a frigate loaded with war bounty off the coast of Iron Rocks on the North Sea. The treasure they hauled was to buy mercenaries to join the Rhodurian Army. We caught them in a fog and boarded their ship. But, before we could transfer the loot into our boats, the escort fleet of warships that had been guarding the treasure caught on to what had happened and sank the frigate. Most of us managed to escape to our ships and outmaneuver the bulky warships around the rocky coast. But the treasure sank to the Sea's floor. My share would have given me enough to buy a farm to go with my smithy and set me for life. But, the way the tide breaks over those rocks, the treasure might as well be in a volcano's belly. We searched and lost ships and men without ever finding the gold."

Gerwin paused, his cheeks reddening a little. "My question, what I would ask the God, is how to find that treasure. Although, after Ahrik's and Jitru's death, asking for treasure seems a might selfish."

Brandr next related his story about being a blacksmith apprentice and his mission to find help for his ill uncle. Craden saw the anxiety in Brandr's eyes as he opened up to the others. Maybe it was there because he was the only one who had run out of food. Nonetheless, he carried himself admirably.

Erlak stood, and in his rich tones, related his story, "I grew up in Dentrek, had a comfortable life there as the son of a calligrapher. Having been exposed to traders, military leaders, and strumen, I decided at a young age that I wanted to travel and see the places these men talked about. A struman named Greely, aligned with the Northern branch of Stallwret's Army, told me about the opportunities of a struman assigned a commitment with an army."

Craden had avoided getting too close with Erlak. Not because of any personal issue, but for the very reason of what Erlak wanted to be. He listened to the man's dream without comment and tried to bury the painful memories that wanted to come out with Erlak's story.

Erlak continued, "I've been fortunate to train with a few notable strumen, learned the art of record keeping, cartography, instrument playing and story telling. With solid recommendations from those instructors, I've been offered commitments with three armies: Greylock's Primary Infantry, Varsnook the Blue's Great Sea Armada, and Morson's Army. If I chose the latter, I don't know if I would serve on Morson's fleet or with the infantry and I won't be able to find out prior to accepting commitment. I've come to ask the God which offer I should take."

Craden was familiar with all of these armies. He knew men who had served as strumen for Greylock and Varsnook, and was familiar with the high reputation Morson had earned. Captain Hallsteinn had entertained negotiations to align with Morson prior to his company's defeat and disbandment. Craden's throat yearned for a drink.

Craden sunk into his thoughts as Kjartan and Stenn told of their service as soldiers. Craden returned to their stories in time to learn that each wanted to know whether to join with a mercenary ship captained by Fressedrick. Craden's ears pricked at the mention of that name. Fressedrick had earned the reputation of a pirate and men who served under him often came home rich after less than a year at sea. Yet, just as often, the men did not come home at all.

The silence and anticipation grew heavy after Stenn sat down and Craden failed to rise. It was his turn. Everyone had shared his story except Craden. He trusted the men, thought they were

good people, but was not ready to share the truth. Giving words of the full story form in his mind had been a struggle, even on this journey. Yet, he had to say something. He owed the others that much.

“Several years ago, I accompanied a small infantry led by Captain Red Hallsteinn. His forces were ambushed and defeated, but I survived. After the loss of so many friends, I’ve struggled to gain purpose in my life. I’ve come to find a use for my soul and to mend its holes.” It was a portion of the truth, if not a whole portion. It satisfied the others. Yet, it would certainly encourage more questions from Erlak. He would have to deal with those questions as they came. Although he was skeptical, Craden voiced his hope that the door would open on the morrow.

It did not. Nor did the door open for several days thereafter. Brandr had grown weak and lethargic, and at times a little vocal about his hunger. Craden’s heart ached at seeing his friend suffer. He again tried to share his own food with the young man, but it did not work. Brandr insisted that he could not see the food on the fork and his bites that appeared to Craden to remove the beef chunks from the utensil gave him no sustenance. Brandr’s condition became grimmer each day. Craden began waiting until after Brandr fell asleep to partake of his meals and seasoned each course with a heavy dose of guilt. Hunger made a much finer gravy.

Craden and the others entreated, implored, and begged Aleh to help Brandr, but to no avail. She stuck to the regimen and her instructions without deviation. Apparently, servants of a God served more valiantly than did servants of man. Craden found himself wishing Ahrik were still with them. The surly warrior would have negotiated with the wicked blade of his ax. Perhaps he would have been more persuasive than the rest of the group. None that remained seriously considered violence against the servant. She appeared to age further before them, her once brilliant gold hair was now bone white; and her skin, which had been pink and vibrant at first, became paler and almost held a gray-blue tone. Craden wondered if she had been taken from service in the world of daylight and fresh air only to wilt below ground.

In a desperate effort to gain exit from the hall, the group set a watch schedule to see if they could discover how Aleh came and left. Erlak and Kjartan watched her during the morning, or the period of time when the group first awakened. Gerwin and Stenn watched in the middle of the day and Craden and Brandr were assigned the evening. With four eyes upon her, she never left the hall, but somehow, in the late evening, when the rest of the group gathered to hear Erlak tell stories, and before Craden could position himself to keep her in his sights, Aleh disappeared. Of course she reappeared the next morning. The watch was set again, but soon the group realized it was futile to try to discover escape through watching her.

More than a week after Brandr ran out of food, Kjartan and Stenn also found the table empty. They celebrated their last meal by gorging on whitefish until they were sick. With the passing of time, Kjartan’s wounds had healed quite well and no longer required binding. Ugly brown scabs and pink new skin sealed the breach of flesh and they all considered it good fortune that Kjartan caught no fever or disease. The scars he would bear might earn him more than one drink at a bar and the admiration of a lady or two. Craden knew that some woman were impressed by men who bore marks of battle and Kjartan’s would be prominent.

While Brandr, Kjartan, and Stenn spent an increasing amount of time sleeping each day, Craden spent more and more time studying the riddle on the scroll and pondering over a solution to the current dilemma. Never had an answer eluded him for so long. Never had he tried so long to find an answer. But, even more importantly, Craden felt helpless to test his ideas. There was no way to go confront the wolf again, not that he had any solid new ideas of how to get past the animal.



Likewise, he found no ideas to try that might save the group from starvation. He had failed himself and he had failed the other men.

Craden spent even more time working out issues that dealt with his own soul. Years earlier, he had resigned himself to the conclusion that his soul was lost forever; that the hole he punched in it had forever ruined him. He wondered over how to phrase the question to the God and wondered if there was hope to overcome the horrible mistake he made. Craden was relieved that during these times, the men gave him space. Erlak had required more attention and asked many questions about serving with an army and Craden advised that life as a committed struman was difficult, rewarding, and at times hilarious. He found that although it was not always easy to talk about the many good memories he had as a military struman, it was good to remember that they existed. It became easier to talk to the earnest young Erlak and Craden believed the young man would make a fine military struman, whichever commitment he accepted.

Then the day came when Erlak and Gerwin were to finish their last meal. They had stretched their remaining food over more than two weeks. Brandr no longer rose and moved about. He would open his eyes in the evening to hear Erlak's tales, but would only drink water when it was brought to him. Craden thought it fortunate that there was water. However, he was not sure if it was better to die of hunger or of thirst. One thing was certain, a man died faster without water. For some reason the image of a dog paddling in the middle of a great sea with no chance to reach shore returned to Craden's mind.

After Erlak and Gerwin had four heaping plates of a hot cinnamon pudding, a food that neither of them particularly enjoyed, but one that filled their stomachs with a life-prolonging substance, the group retired to the pallets to listen to Erlak's stories. Kjartan and Stenn waited on their pallets and Craden had been seated at his table working on the riddle. He could use a diversion from it.

Craden settled next to Brandr to rouse the young man and pour some water down his throat. "Wake, Brandr. Time for a story. Time for a drink."

Nothing.

Craden said it a little louder, gently shaking Brandr's shoulders.

Nothing.

The others were now drawn from their separate conversations and watched on with concern as Craden tried to rouse Brandr. Craden's chest constricted as he leaned his ear close to Brandr's face and felt at the young man's wrists. "He's breathing and his heart is beating." The others sighed in relief as Craden kept coaxing Brandr to awaken.

As Craden felt the tears pool in his eyes, Brandr moved his head weakly to the side and squinted against the flickering candlelight. In a shallow rasp, Brandr asked, "Is it time?"

"Time for Erlak to tell his stories and for you to drink. Aye, it's time," Craden assured in a voice rich with false confidence.

"No... time to ask my question... time to see God?" Brandr's chest heaved weakly as he coughed the words out.

"Sorry, friend. Not that time yet, but soon. I think we'll be on our way very soon." Craden's lies stuck in his throat like salted pork skins.

Brandr's cheeks sunk into his face and the skin around his milky eyes was dark and colorless. Craden did not want to think what the rest of him looked like. "I need you to wake up all the way, Brandr. I've something to say and I hope it helps."

Brandr struggled to prop himself up on elbows, but was unable. Craden patted him reassuringly. "No, you don't have to move, just open your eyes and hear what I have to say."

“Alright.” Brandr’s voice sounded better; perhaps the water loosened up some of the tightness and softened some of the cracks.

The others gathered around Craden as he firmed his resolve and told his story. “As I mentioned, I was assigned under Captain Hallsteinn and committed as his company’s struman. I was there the day they were slaughtered, but I’ve told you that much already.” Craden’s tears pooled in his eyes as he looked into Brandr’s gaunt face. “What I did not tell you was that I was responsible for their deaths. I was responsible for the ambush catching the whole company unaware. I was responsible for the Rhodurian Horde Cavalry riding upon us, past us, and before us unaware.”

The uneasy silence in the room sought to lodge itself in Craden’s throat, but he pushed away his fears and poured his words on Brandr, hoping they would nourish what the young man lacked. “We were camped in a lush valley near a small village called Thrattlin in the Northern Kingdom. I was asked to check the position of all other forces in the region by spending a day riding to the top of two mountains. From one, I could see the valley ahead for miles. From the other, I could see behind us clear to the coast. I was to take the company maps with me and mark any corrections that I could note from the vantage of the mountains.

“I have never been a lot to look on. But while camped there, I caught the fancy of a beautiful girl, a thatcher’s daughter. Dalla had long black hair, dark brown eyes, and a smile that could thaw a winterfrost. She asked to come with me on my ride and I was thrilled to take her. Captain Hallsteinn would have never agreed to me taking her on official assignment, but I decided the Captain did not need to know.” Craden shook his head and forced himself to keep looking the others in the eyes. “By midmorning, we had put the base of the first mountain behind us and were making good progress when she asked if we could stop for a short rest.

“That short rest ended up with us watching the moon cross the sky through a sprinkle of stars. I never reached the top of the first mountain. Or the second.” His throat constricted, but he forced the words out. “When I awoke late the next morning, Dalla was gone and so were the maps... They showed where our company had been. More importantly, they charted our course for the next week. I was devastated. I didn’t know what to do.”

Gerwin put a reassuring hand on Craden’s shoulder. “We all make mistakes from time to time, friend. They don’t cost us our souls.”

Craden shook his head. “You’re right. Our mistakes don’t cost us our souls, but what we do with those mistakes can. What I did, was the worst thing I could have done.” He clenched his teeth and it was a short while before he could go on. “I succumbed to my pride and ill-founded hope that I could recover what I had lost. When I returned, I lied to Captain Hallsteinn. I told him that roads ahead and behind were clear, that I had checked them from the mountains and saw from the sea to the northern plateaus.”

It hurt to continue, but he did. “Then, I lied again. The Captain asked for the maps... I told him there were some inconsistencies with the map and the lay of the land, and that I had sketched in the changes while on the mountain tops, but that I had not had the chance to finish adding the details in ink. As soon as the ink dried, I would give them to him.

“I left the command tent and went straight to Dalla’s house. She was not there, but her father was easy to find. He was the only thatcher in town, and rough weather was always a problem in the highlands. I found him on a roof in the center of the village. He told me Dalla had not come back home since she left with me. I thought he was going to trim my heartstrings with his thatch knife, but I guess the surprised look on my face convinced him that I was not to blame. It also gave me hope that she was innocent. Perhaps she was taken away because she caught a thief raiding my

pack. Then again, she may have been in league with the Rhodurians. I never found out.

Tears dribbled down his right cheek and his throat felt like it was packed with wool. "What I did find out was that the Rhodurian cavalry passed our company in the forest north of Thrattlin. They knew which fork we would take in the valley ahead and found a ravine cliff to await our passing." His chest compressed against the emotion that fought to come out. It made him cough and he took several deep breaths. "Captain Hallsteinn told me he had a bad feeling about traversing the mountains ahead, but I assured him the way was clear." Working his mouth to find the moisture that his eyes could not contain, he went on, "that afternoon, three hundred fifty-two men rode into the ravine called Garborg Alley and only a handful made it out. Rocks from above killed a good many and sent the rest of us into confused panic. Captain Hallsteinn and his first in command, his son Jorly, rallied the men into two groups and tried to break out of the ravine from either side. Arrows rained down from the rocky cliffs above. Duggan was down; an arrow in his neck spilled his life on the rocks. Those who reached the mouth or end of the ravine found a wall of heavily armored and weaponed cavalry."

Tears continued to streak down Craden's face as he choked out the last part of his story, "I followed Captain Hallsteinn. At the end of the ravine, we ran into the wall of Rhodurians. We were about to engage when Jorly's company gave a retreat cry from behind. Captain Hallsteinn turned and took his riders to support Jorly's. The Rhodurians cut into our flanks like wild animals. We rode back through the ravine, over soldiers' bodies broken or crushed by stones thrown from above. Some moaned and others cried for help. One young man pulled himself over the rocks with bloody hands because his legs were broken. He cried for us to stop and help him."

Craden wiped at his eyes and nose with his tunic sleeve. "The look Captain gave me that day will haunt me forever. As will the other more gruesome images that I carry. We rode through the ravine, dodging attacks. Many of the dead bodies bore the faces of my friends. When we caught up with Jorly's riders, most, including Jorly himself, had been cut down." The memory of Jorly's body lying in the dirt nearly paralyzed Craden, but his story was not done. "Our company fought valiantly and cost the Rhodurians many cavalry that day. But, our losses were the greater by far. By the time I fell, I gazed upon not only Jorly, but also Captain Hallsteinn's lifeless face. Those faces visit me yet in my sleep..." Craden could no longer look the men in their eyes. He felt like a coward, but continued, "Struck down by a Rhodurian blade, I was left for dead with the rest." He raised the curtain of hair. "The wound that left this scar produced enough blood for them to believe me dead."

The others were silent, no one knew what to say, or thought better of saying anything. Craden did not expect anything from them, except disdain and loss of respect. How could anyone be trusted after he failed so critically?

Gerwin broke the silence. "So you've come to get your soul back, or at least to find out how?"

Craden was relieved that someone spoke and his tears kept coming. He thought Gerwin's words even carried a tinge of sympathy. "Aye. Though, my hopes are slight, I would know what I could do to redeem my soul. After seven years, I had long given up hope. Yet, even still, part of me would ask what happened with Dalla that night. Did she betray me, or was she a victim too? I wish the truth of me was better to share, but there it is. My soul is lost, but even when I have the chance to gain a divine answer, I think to waste the question."

"That would not be a waste," Erlak interjected. "That would be a noble thing to know. I'm sure you've carried the blame by yourself, but knowing the answer about Dalla might help you share the burden."

Craden shook his head. "I would not wish to share the burden. I'll bear it and pay the cost

when my time comes. However, my heart wanted to know how to remember Dalla. I've never been even that close to a woman before or after. I am not opposed to the idea, but I've not been able to trust another woman. Nor have I dared get close enough to a woman to obligate myself to tell the truth you have all heard."

Brandr tried to reach a bony hand up to touch Craden on the arm, but missed his mark. Craden instead gave Brandr a pat and rose. "I've told you all the full truth because we are in a dire place and lives may depend on it. If we don't make it out, the truth dies with us all. In any case, you've all earned the right to know."

Craden walked over to the round table and took up a plate. He knew there was one more thing he had to do before he lay down. Nine dishes remained, enough to last him another month, if he budgeted them. He took a platter and began serving himself. Within an hour, the round table was completely empty.

Craden was the first to rise the next morning. His stomach ached from the improbable combination of food he ate the night before. His dreams had been vivid and terrifying, although he did not know if that was because of the conversation or the meal. Often when he ate large amounts of food right before bedding down, he would have realistic nightmares. Wiping the grainy substance from the corners of his eyes and blinking them repeatedly to drive away the blur, he crossed the room.

Craden had to rub his eyes twice more before he trusted what they saw. A doorway had opened into the cold dark tunnels of the mountain. He cried out to the others, "Gerwin, Erlak! The door is open! We're free!"

It took little time for them to awake and join in his celebration. They had very few supplies to gather. Weapons and newly filled waterskins were secured and men were ready to go. Craden and Gerwin would carry Brandr until they reached the God, or some other aid. Brandr had not yet opened his eyes to share in the good news. Craden recalled how difficult it had been to rouse him the night before. He knelt beside the young man and gently shook him.

Nothing.

He whispered Brandr's name in his ear, and as Craden brushed against his face, he felt coolness on the young man's skin. Joy burst like a bubble and was swept away by a hurricane wave of despair. "No! Don't die! Not you! Not now!" His cries brought the other men to tears and they all gathered around the fallen friend. Brandr was gone. For a long time, the group remained in the hall that had welcomed them with a feast and become a prison. In the end, they decided to take Brandr's body with them and give him a proper burial outside of the mountain. They wrapped him in one of the woolen blankets and used a second blanket to fashion a sling so two men could share the burden of his weight.

Gerwin handed Craden Brandr's sword. "Wear it." His eyes, though wet, were serious and brokered no room for argument.

Craden shook his head. "It's not right. The blade should go with him. It's not mine to take."

"I'm not saying you'll keep it. I'm saying take it for now. Ain't no telling what lurks in the dark ahead and that sword won't do any good wrapped in this bundle. Besides, it's a heavy blade and I'd rather you bore it's weight." The last sentence seemed to be Gerwin's attempt at loosening the tension. It worked only in the sense that Craden strapped on the blade without further argument.

Grim-faced and empty-hearted, they left the hall.

Craden, Gerwin, and Erlak took turns bearing Brandr's body. Kjartan and Stenn were so

weakened from lack of food that they could barely keep up with the other men. As they went, Craden's sense of responsibility and blame gnawed at him like a thousand moths in a cotton spinnery. Had he told the truth at the start, Brandr might still be alive. Had he and the others had faith that clearing the table might open the door, Brandr might still be alive. Questions and doubt threatened his well-being. How many deaths could his shoulders bear? The others, whether from their own grieving, or some other reason, kept distance between themselves and Craden. He assumed they blamed him for Brandr's death.

Icy darkness surrounded the remaining party members as they proceeded down the wide, rough tunnel. Irregular rock ledges and cappings slowed their travel and the smell of wet earth and mold loomed about them. The pace was deliberate, but soon the group reached a fork in the tunnel and found another scroll. Erlak set the lantern on the floor and crouched in its light to open the tightly rolled parchment. Craden and Gerwin carefully lowered Brandr's body to the floor and rested weary arms. Arms aching, Craden worked at a couple of knots in his left shoulder.

Nagging to be heard, thoughts about how they had gotten out of the hall occupied Craden's mind. He did not know how they had finally earned their freedom. Whether it was the sharing of personal hopes and purposes or the consumption of food, or even some other thing, Craden did not know. Maybe the God required a human sacrifice. Craden disliked that thought for a number of reasons. Again he wondered what kind of a God would require such a thing? Also, if that was true, what chance of survival did the rest of them have? A lingering, morbid thought materialized as Erlak prepared to read the scroll. Ahrik and Jitru had crossed the bridge Bifrost and entered the halls of the Gods. Although Craden knew only a struman's portion of theology, he believed Ahrik and Jitru had already had the chance to meet a God and, presumably, ask a question.

Erlak read, "Our lives are but a series of paths and choices. So too is the final challenge. As in life, it is the less traveled way that leads to greatness and so it shall lead you to your destination."

Gerwin broke the somber atmosphere with a carefully upbeat reassurance. "That seems to be the clearest of the challenges yet. Perhaps the time of games has passed."

Craden nodded his agreement, or at least his optimism. Inside, he doubted the test would be plain and simple. Just as likely, the less traveled way would lead to a fog-shrouded cliff's edge or some horrible monster. The negative spiral of his thoughts tugged at his sense of hope. He pushed those thoughts away and set his mind to calculating loopholes and riddles in the last clue. Perhaps he would solve this one in time.

The fork ahead broke into two narrow tunnels. Both had irregular openings, yet the right path sounded of dripping water and a trickling stream glistened off its black rock floor. The left tunnel was dry, but undulating rises and twists gave it the look of a stiffened stable rope that had been trodden by too many horses. Stenn and Kjartan studied the floor of each tunnel for a short time while the rest of the group discussed which option to take.

"I say the right side. The water would keep people from taking it for fear of slipping in the dark, or reaching an underground pool or submerged passageway," Gerwin suggested.

"No, the left, I think," Erlak said diplomatically. "Its irregularity would concern a traveler that it might twist itself into an impassable crack or treacherous drop-off."

Both men looked at Craden as if he might settle the matter. He was relieved when Stenn spoke up. "I see signs of wear in the right path, but none in the left."

Gerwin, not wanting to accept being wrong, said, "Perhaps the wear is the result of the water."

"No," Kjartan replied. "Stenn's right. The wear he sees is clearly from the foot of man or

beast. The markings are too wide and shallow for it to have been made by water.”

Gerwin nodded. “Then the decision has been made.”

The left tunnel took the party up and down and from side to side. But, after a while, it broadened and leveled. Craden believed they were heading up, gradually. Before long, another branch divided the path, this time into three legs. The center was clearly the smallest, and soon the party disappeared into it. It led up at sharp incline for a long time and then nearly disappeared straight up. After a brief inspection, Kjartan noted that there was an opening above that might lead somewhere. Hoisting Brandr’s body up was sweat-inspiring work. Craden, on the bottom end, heaved with all his strength to force the body up. Yet, after a short climb and a fair-length crawl, they emerged in a declining tunnel. It looked promising. Flecks of gold that had decorated the shaft of the mine when they entered reappeared on the walls. The flecks became ribbons of gold that twisted and slipped above them as the tunnel bore back down into the mountain.

Behind them, in the distance, growling echoed. It was not the growling of the great wolf, for it would not have fit in these tunnels, but the growling of something cat-like and hungry. More growls joined with it, but the men could see none of the creatures that made the noise. Not wanting to fight in their weakened condition, they moved on.

Two more forks split this path and each time the group unanimously agreed which choice to take. In some places, mold coated the walls and ceiling of a tunnel, but it did not last for long. With all the twists and turns, Craden’s sense of direction was long rendered useless.

“Does anyone have a bearing of what direction we’re going?” Craden asked.

“I didn’t know which direction we were going when we started,” answered Erlak

“I guess I didn’t either,” Gerwin agreed. It was Erlak and Craden’s turn to carry Brandr’s body. The group was stopping more often as Kjartan and Stenn required. Their strength was as lost as the group was. Craden wondered how they could branch off so many times and have any hope of choosing the right way.

“I didn’t recognize your name, Craden,” Erlak said during one of their rests.

“Should you have?” Craden asked, knowing that a struman’s name was his moneymaker and that his assumed name would jog no memories that Erlak would expect to find.

“I’m sure you had served as a struman long enough to gain a reputation. I suppose you lost that as well as your friends.”

“Aye.” Craden expected the next question.

“What name did you serve under?”

Craden deliberated whether to tell him the truth. Hiding the truth had done little good on this trip, but his name had been buried long ago and it would do no good to raise it this day. Yet, in the end, Craden decided it was the lesser of his secrets already revealed. “Jan Decker.”

Erlak whistled low and long. “Now that’s a name I’ve heard. Your telling of the Battle of Warrabon in Shrenkshire was inspirational to me when I was ten. No wonder you’ve looked familiar all this time. And your record of the Ruftharad Quest was a great achievement of verse and pacing. I studied it when I was fourteen.”

Craden was impressed. “You’ve a mind for history. I hope you’ll be able to use it.”

“What do you mean?” Erlak’s eyebrows raised.

“I mean — I hope we all get out of here alive.” Craden did not intend to end the conversation so abruptly, but that was the effect of his words.

“I suppose you’re right.”

After another short winding passageway, the group’s hopes dashed as if hurtled against the

stone wall. They reached the first fork, where the scroll had hung.

“A blood-shedding maze!” Gerwin cursed.

“I guess we take the right path this time and get wet,” Erlak offered, trying to maintain the sense of hope that they had when entering the tunnels. This time, they took the right path. The passage was easier met, but after only a handful of forks, the group found the starting point again. At times, they heard the beasts growling behind them, but never close. Perhaps they kept their distance because they feared the number of men, or perhaps they were waiting for the men to wear down and rest.

Hope was fading as they entered the maze of tunnels a third time. Beginning in the left tunnel, the group attempted an exploration of every tunnel. Some ended after a while, but most continued on, branching out time and again. It was impossible to follow each to its conclusion or to keep an accurate memory of each tunnel they had been down. So, they kept choosing the options that seemed less traveled. They kept finding more tunnels without ends.

During a time when they were stopped, Craden lamented over the poor choices he had made in the hall. Brandr may have died because of him. Just like Captain Hallsteinn and Jorly. What is one more death? Despair threatened to swallow him. If only he had a drink. But that had done no good before. It had not changed the past. He had not hidden from the truth, but had blurred the rest of his world around it. What he had done to himself after the massacre had done no good for Captain Hallsteinn, Jorly, or anyone. No. Craden would not die with the others. He would do all that was in his power to help those around him and finish the mission. How, was the only question.

As if in answer to his silent promise, Craden saw Erlak writing with his finger on the floor. Craden watched the writing, which was upside down from his position. It looked like “HETV”, but he knew that was not right. “What are you writing?”

I was trying to figure out how I would spell Aleh’s name. I figure Ahrik, Jitru, and Brandr deserve to have their story told. So, I’ll write it all when I get home.” His eyes held some optimism, but it looked fleeting. Kjartan and Stenn looked beaten, but that might have been as much hunger-induced fatigue as anything. Gerwin read the scroll and grumbled about a map being worth ten scrolls. Craden thought that was a low estimate.

Craden looked at the scratching in the dust. Knowing the letters gave him a new perspective and a bitter chill raced down his spine. Hela. The thought froze him and a floodgate of realization opened. He knew the name. If the woman was truly Hela, then the hall where Brandr died was Elvidner, the hall famous for death.

As this realization sunk in, Gerwin had the group ready to move. The growls began to grow in the distance and they needed to find their destination. The first fork was only a short distance down the hall. Craden knew what he had to do. Kjartan and Stenn checked the floor and advised the group that they had already been down the left tunnel. Gerwin led the group down the right side.

Craden hung back, waiting for the others to enter the right tunnel, and bid them a silent goodbye. Quietly, he felt his way into the left tunnel and disappeared into the dark. He immediately questioned going without a light, but did not have much of a choice. The others would have argued that he was a fool for doing this, that he would be vulnerable to whatever was chasing them. The growls persisted and seemed to be closing in upon him. Yet, if Hela was the keeper of the last hall, and if it was truly Elvidner, then he believed he had figured out some of the other pieces to the puzzle. Stumbling slowly through the dark, he criticized himself for not realizing immediately that the great wolf was Fenris. What else could such a horrendous beast be but the spawn of a God?

The growls grew louder still and Craden imagined whatever was following was only fifty feet away. He imagined they tracked him by scent in the dark, or perhaps they were creatures familiar with dark places and had developed other senses to help them hunt without light. He hurried, but tripped and struck his head on the rock wall as he fell. Stars burst in his eyes, but he kept conscious and rose to his feet. He was sure he had finally figured out the last riddle. The only way he could “take the less traveled way” was to leave the group and choose a path of his own. He hoped he was right as the growls of the animals drew close. The smell of sweat and blood filled his nostrils. After feeling the wetness around his temple, where his head had struck, he realized that the blood was his own. It would lead the creatures right to him.

A light appeared ahead in the dark. The lantern — his group? No, it was too bright. The path was visible in the light. He ran and nearly fell when his foot slipped on a wet rock, but he kept going. The light was brighter yet and within the light, stood a person. The creatures at his heels stopped and retreated. Whether they feared the light or the person, or simply obeyed it, Craden did not know.

The light expanded and Craden saw that the rough tunnel had opened into a grand hall. Pillars of marble, carved statues, golden banners and elegant tapestries appeared before him. He entered and approached the personage on a gilded dais. A golden haired Goddess stood with hands clasped in front; blue robes draped about her slender form and platinum leaves and flowers wove about her head like a crown. She smiled at Craden and said, “Welcome.”

She looked much like the woman from the great hall, Elvidner, but something was different about her, more compelling. Hela had degenerated over the weeks the group spent trapped in her hall. She was reputed to be a terrifying sight to look upon, but she had never been that, even with the faded beauty she exhibited in the end. If Hela had a sister, Craden believed the Goddess before him would have been her. “I thank you.” He humbly bowed to a knee. But, Hela had no sister.

“You have passed the final test and may now claim your prize. What question do you have for me?” Her smile was radiant above the bounties of the earth, a rainbow, the dew sparkled blossoms of spring daffodils, and a crimson sunset all joined together.

It was all an illusion; he forced himself to remember. Had he not figured the truth out before he arrived, the Goddess’s glory would have overwhelmed him. Even knowing the truth, it was nearly impossible to overcome the presence of a God. “I have a request, not a question.”

Something twinkled in the Goddess’s eye. “I’m not a djini or the first star of the night sky. The promise you were given was the answer to a question, not the granting of a request or a wish.”

“Aye.” Craden believed he was right, but the gamble was a rich one for him to lose if he was wrong. But, having figured out the clues, his faith burned brightly. “But, I have a request all the same. You can choose to grant it or not. I believe it is within your power to do so.”

Amusement flirted with curiosity on her beautiful face, but the Goddess shook her head. “Why not ask the question you came to have answered. I know of your past and the hole in your soul. I might be able to give you the answer to the question that has haunted you for seven years. If you ask.”

Craden swallowed. After this, he would be committed to his barely hatching plan. “I think I have learned the answer to that question. Instead, I ask you to travel the bridge Bifrost and bring Brandr back in fully restored health. I realize too much time has passed for the others who have died. I cannot save Hallsteinn, Jorly, or the other soldiers of my company, nor can I save Ahrik and Jitru. They have long since crossed the great bridge. I saw the way each died and I doubt little that they are now in Valhalla, feasting at Odin’s table. But, I think I am not mistaken when I say that less



than a day has passed since Brandr died, and his spirit shall yet be on its way to Asgard. I also ask that the rest of the group, including Brandr and I, be returned safely to Winter's Thimble."

Anger flashed on the Goddess's face, but a careful smile returned, "I'm not confirming anything you say, unless you would have that be your question. Nor am I saying that I have the power to do what you ask, but I will tell you that a Goddess dances for no mortal's amusement. Your boldness is impressive, but your intelligence is lacking if you think I would do what you ask."

"No. I guess not. It was worth a try I suppose. But, I'm not yet resigned to defeat."

"What will you promise or offer that I might change my mind? If I should so choose." She focused her ocean blue eyes on him, as if weighing a cut of meat.

"Freedom."

"Hah!" She laughed out loud. "A mortal comes to a Goddess with the request so bold that it's price would be a hundred lives or more, and offers something he cannot give and of which a Goddess has in infinite supply? You are a rare treat."

Craden let his mouth smile just a little, but could hardly keep his legs from shaking in fear. "You are right. I cannot give freedom, but I can take it away."

Her laugh halted and the anger in her eyes remained. "What are you saying?" Her voice lowered menacingly.

Craden's voice cracked as he spoke. "I know who you are. You've given yourself away by the challenges you posed. You were right when you said a Goddess doesn't dance for a mortal's amusement. Along this journey, it has been the mortals who have done the dancing. But only one God would amuse himself so. One God would use Fenris as his gatekeeper. One God would bring its amusement to Niffleheim, to the great hall, Elvidner, and generously give them to Hela to starve. Only that God should not be free to do so. That God was bound by the other Gods and locked away in until Ragnarok. Perhaps that is why I did not suspect it was the great calumniator, Loki. You may hide behind the beauty of a Goddess, but it is Loki who I see."

A burst of light blinded Craden and he was thrust to the ground, held fast by a hurricane's wind. When the light dimmed, the shadowy image of a man stood over him. "And you think you shall not join Brandr? You think I shall not send you there myself?"

Craden's tongue swelled and his mouth parched. "Yes. I think you will not send me to Asgard." He tried to produce spit, but the wind dried his mouth. "Because, if you do, I shall tell the Gods that you have escaped. From my journey, I have enough information to convince them of the truth of my words. I presume they do not know, or else they would hunt you down and Thor would finally let his hammer loose on you."

The wind gusted and Craden felt his heart stop. For an instant, he believed he had experienced death. Then, just as suddenly the wind slowed. "And what if I just returned you to Hela and instruct her to give you just enough food to let you live."

This had been Craden's greatest fear. Death would be swift, but Loki had the power to make Craden's life a torturous marathon. "I'd say that my body is yet mortal and my years are numbered. At some time, my spirit shall make the trip to Asgard and the story I should then tell will be your end. But, there's no need for any of that."

Loki stood like a thunderhead above him, allowing him to continue. "My interest lies in gaining back only a portion of what you have taken, not in divulging your secrets. If you do what I ask, I covenant that I shall not disclose or betray that you are free."

Craden thought for an instant that a smile crossed Loki's face, but in the shadow it was hard to tell. "Perhaps this once I will do the dancing."

Craden's heart raced, "We have a deal, then?"

"Yes. But do not think you have won. If one word of this breaks your lips, then your covenant to me is broken and your life will be mine. I shall dispatch your soul and you shall not say a word to any mortal or God. Agreed?"

"Aye." Craden wanted to hug someone. He knew he was pressing his luck, but he asked anyway. "I changed my mind about the question. I'd like to ask one."

Loki laughed. "I'll answer your question to show that I keep my bargain. It shall be a warning to you."

"What is the answer to the riddle on the scroll that preceded the chamber that held Fenris?"

"Patience."

"Meaning that if we had waited, the wolf would have slept and we could have safely passed, or meaning that we had to wait patiently until someone tried to cross and Fenris was engaged in battle?"

"You've asked your one question."

\* \* \*

Craden, Brandr, Erlak, Gerwin, Kjartan, and Stenn all woke up the next morning nearly frozen under a heavy blanket of snow. Snow continued to fall in waves, whipping about the glen on a strong winter gale. Yet, the joy and surprise of seeing Brandr alive, and in better health than themselves brought a round of cheers from the group. Craden held the young man tightly, crying great sobs that would have embarrassed him in any other circumstance. Soon, the group set off for the Brandyspring Valley.

With snow crunching under foot, Brandr asked Craden, "So did you get your question answered?"

"Aye."

"Well, what was the answer?"

"Didn't I tell you that what a man asks a God is personal? I'm joking, lad! I'm joking!" Craden felt better than he had in seven years. "If we hurry, we ought to reach that orchard by afternoon." He paused. "By the way, my name is Jan."

**THE END**

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than he is. He is old in human standards, but for a wizard that's just foolishness. He can't be more than a hundred and fifty, but that's part of another story. At the time, I was more interested in this new book he was reading.

"A new book, sir?" I asked, trying not to let on my intense interest.

"Yes, a new book," was the casual reply. There was hint of a smile at the corner of his lips as he let the ball of light fade into nothing, and I knew he was playing his old game.

"What's it about, if I may ask?" I said, as he placed the book on top of one of the bookshelves.

"You may ask," was the vague reply.

"Fine, don't tell me!" I said, before muttering a few words under my breath. Unfortunately, he heard some of them.

"Watch your language young one!" he said, though the mischievous smile he is so known for sat conspicuously on his face. I did not reply, but set about throwing some logs onto the cold hearth. The fire had been dead for a long time, and sometimes I wondered if he ever bothered to light a fire when I was not around to do so. He often got quite busy tending to matters the lord put before him, and then there were his own personal interests and pursuits. One of which was keeping secrets from me. I was just about to light another fire when he stopped me.

"We will not need a fire till later. I feel the need to stretch my legs some, and I thought we could pay a visit to the dining hall this morning." I had not expected this. Normally, we never ate breakfast with the lord and his family, but stayed in the east tower until the midday meal. We would always work during these early hours, but here he was putting some papers in order and already starting out the door without me.

"Come on Derrin, don't delay. I'm afraid my stomach is growling fiercely, and I must put something in it before I start nibbling at the end of my quill." He was always a bit dramatic, and I couldn't help but smile. We left the tower by the spiral staircase that still drives me crazy to this day. Going around and around always makes me incredibly dizzy, and even after so many years of living here, I still haven't got used to it. Anyway, it wasn't till we were walking along the slender bridge of wall that connected the tower to the main keep that my mentor explained suddenly what the book was about. I thought he had dropped the subject, but without me to keep the game going, he had no reason to be secretive. Personally, I think he wanted to talk about it the whole time, but not before I had expressed an interest.

"While you were out with Eric yesterday, an old friend of mine came for a visit," he said. Oh, by the way, Eric was the lord's eldest son and one of three children. "I do not think you ever met Burin. He is a wandering bard from the south, and he makes a yearly pilgrimage to the capital to perform the songs he has composed or picked up at the King's court. He found this book during his travels this year and thought I would enjoy it. The title is 'Geric's Journeys', a collection of stories about the many adventures of Geric Outcast."

"So was he?" I asked.

"Was he what?"

"Was Geric an outcast, or is that just a pathetic last name?" I asked, trying not to be disrespectful, even though I felt it was a pretty poor last name.

"It was a title he took when he people disowned him," replied my mentor with a bit of a snap in his voice.

"Why did they disown him?" I asked next, as we passed down another flight of stairs to the great hall of the keep.

"Because he was accused of a crime, and even though they could not prove his guilt with any

evidence, they shunned him," replied my mentor, quickening his strides. He was very hungry. I could always tell. His walking speed would suddenly increase at even the most faint smell of cooking food, as its trace of scent was borne on the air.

"Well that was stupid!" I said, trying to keep up with him.

"Can you think of no other words to relay your point?" he asked, slowing down just enough for me to catch up to him. "I could have sworn I had increased your vocabulary by all the required reading these last few years."

"Sorry sir," I said, knowing he was truly disappointed this time. He joked quite often, but once in awhile he would become very serious. "I suppose I could have said foolish, ridiculous, or even illogical."

"Those would be better substitutes," he said, stopping his brisk walk to look me in the eye. He has those piercing blue eyes that so many people talk about. The kind that can seem to penetrate into your very soul. "You do know why I correct you, don't you?"

"So that I won't sound foolish?" I ventured.

"Yes. To say something is stupid without further comment only makes you look stupid. Anyone in possession of a mind will want to know why you think the way you do, and want evidence that validates your opinion. Otherwise, only fools will take you seriously."

"Thank you for putting up with me, sir," I said with a smile, even though his face was still stern. His expression quickly changed as a smile crossed his face like a ray of sunlight.

"As long as you keep putting up with me," he replied. "Now what do you say to getting some breakfast?"

"Lead on, sir. I'm just as famished as you." We didn't get far when all of a sudden, there was a bloodcurdling scream. Both of us froze where we were. There was another scream, and my mentor stretched out his hands. He closed his eyes briefly in concentration, feeling the air, and then opened them quickly.

"It came from the lord's chambers," he said quickly. "Follow me!" With that, breakfast was forgotten and I found myself running after my mentor up another set of stairs from the great hall. By this time there were many voices filling the air, and deep down in my gut I knew it was bad, whatever it was. Little did I know just how much worse it was going to get.

We arrived at the doorway to the lord's chambers and found a group of people standing around his body. Some of those gathered were guards, and they were looking about the room for signs of an intruder. Others were searching over the lord's body to see if he might have been wounded in any way. Meanwhile, one of the servants was picking up the object the lord had been holding only moments ago. It was an ornate silver chalice. A puddle of deep red liquid colored the floor where the cup had been dropped.

"How did it happen?" cried one of the maids, poking her head in behind me. From the ashen color of her face, I guessed that she had discovered the body.

"I don't know yet, but Echor will find out," I said, while my mentor was busy examining the body.

"Not a scratch on him," said one man.

"The drink wasn't poisoned either," piped up another. "Old Tom here tested the stuff, and he didn't die." I looked at the old servant and wondered by his expression if the act was voluntary or not.

"It's dark sorceries, that's what, and no mistake," said another in what he thought to be an ominous voice. Still, I had to agree with him when Echor looked up in confusion. We locked eyes

and I knew immediately that he had not found the answer.

"Was it magic?" asked one of the guards, looking at Ecthor this time. The man's eyes were as wide as saucers.

"I can find no other explanation right now," replied my mentor, rising to address the people gathered around. "I will need more time to examine his lordship's body, but until I can discover how it came about, I must ask everyone to remain calm and follow my direction."

"I think not," exclaimed another voice. The people at the door parted to let a tall man enter. He was dressed in his usual rich attire and looked down his nose at all those around. His haughty demeanor was, as always, unbearable. Of course I am referring to the lord's hired tutor, Sir Matthew of Perin. He had been brought from the capital city to teach the lord's children. It was his duty to enhance their knowledge, while Ecthor taught them wisdom. Sir Matthew's short hair and the glitter of his spectacles gave him the appearance of man well versed in every subject, and though he was not, he still gained the respect of people who did not know better.

"What did you say?" asked the guard who had been speaking to my mentor.

"I say do not trust so hastily," replied Sir Matthew. "Think logically, my dear people. His lordship is dead, and not by any weapon or poison. We have assumed it must be magic, which is a very wise assumption I might add. Yet who among us in this castle, or even in the surrounding countryside, has the ability to use magic?" There was dull pause, and looking back I could not help but laugh at the rather blank expressions on most faces. Only my mentor caught on, but he did not jump to his own defense. He simply locked eyes with me again, and I heard his voice in my mind saying to walk back slowly.

"Who is the only wizard in Glencoven Castle?" asked Sir Matthew with a tone of disbelief, as no one was yet forthcoming with the answer. "Are you all fools? Ecthor is the only wizard in the kingdom!" I wanted to point out he was wrong there, but discretion is the better path in such a situation. Besides, I am still an apprentice even as I write this.

It still took another few seconds for the listeners to catch what he was saying, and by then I had backed up to the wall of the chamber. Ecthor looked over at me, and I could tell he was speaking an incantation. I felt a strange sensation wash all over me, and I had to bite my lip to keep from saying something in my surprise. I was invisible! I couldn't see my hands, or the rest of my body for that matter, but at the time it was my hands that stuck out most in my mind. This particular spell was a great secret, and only a few wizards and mages in the world knew it. Up until now, I had never suspected my mentor was one of the privileged few.

By this point in the prolonged drama, the people finally understood what Sir Matthew had meant. To be fair, I must admit a certain fact. To the people of the castle, magic as a rule was regarded as the black sorcery stuff that harms and destroys life. Since Ecthor does not use his powers in such a way, in their eyes, my mentor was to just a master of helpful enchantments. For superstitious people, the thought seems quite ironic I know, but there it is just the same. For the time being though, they accepted Sir Matthew's logic.

Questions began to shower my mentor like spring rain, and I don't think he got to answer even one. By the time all the shouting had stopped, the guards were escorting Ecthor to the dungeon. He was very calm about it and allowed them to take him away without a struggle. You'd think that should have been a clue to the people, but as was just demonstrated, they weren't exactly what you would call a bright lot. Obviously, my mentor had been a good few steps ahead of Sir Matthew, for no sooner had they taken Ecthor away than the tutor sent out a group of guards to find me. He had noticed my absence and realized what had happened.

"We cannot allow his apprentice to escape. He might be just as guilty!" cried the tutor. So saying, Sir Matthew dismissed the people gathered and set about getting things in order. He had Lord Henry set onto his bed with arms crossed over his chest and sheet pulled over his face, and then he placed the chalice onto a side table next to the bed. He looked once at the dead lord and touched his own forehead as a sign of respect. I imagine he was wishing the deceased lord a safe journey to the other side.

There was no time to get past Sir Matthew. His swift stride had brought him to the door faster than I, and trying to squeeze past would only betray my presence. I slumped up against the closed door and heard him give instructions to the guards just outside. "Make sure no one goes into this room without my express permission."

I knew I was trapped and had no way of getting out and past the guards. Sure I was invisible and they wouldn't see me, but if doors just started opening with no one there, smart people like Sir Matthew might begin to guess what was happening. I knew I had to wait it out, and with a dead body to boot. It could have been worse, I kept saying over and over again, but at the moment I couldn't figure out how. My stomach was growling like crazy now, and had anyone been around, invisibly would have meant nothing.

I hadn't a clue when Sir Matthew would be back or when someone with his 'express permission' would get around to opening that door. So I stopped to consider what I could do. I was positive that my mentor had nothing to do with the lord's murder. I had to prove this, though, and soon. Sir Matthew was a stickler for proper procedure and would surely have a trial set to review what little evidence there was. In fact, there was none! For all I knew, I had only a few hours to unravel this mystery before my mentor was condemned to death.

I started by examining the chalice. It was beautiful piece of craftsmanship with a long stem and a well-rounded bowl. The embossed figure of a rose vine climbing up the stem was done in great detail, showing not only the delicate folds of the rose petals, but also the fine line in the leaves and small thorns. This special cup had been given as a gift to the lord by my mentor, commemorating his fiftieth birthday. Those that had examined it and the body said there was no wound or signs of poison in the drink, but I had a persistent feeling that I was missing something. Then it hit me. The poison had been on the outside of the chalice!

Hopefully, some of you already figured out the answer, but at the time I was wondering how it had been accomplished. There were no trace of a substance surrounding the outer edge of the cup, so I had to look further. I tried a simple spell my mentor had taught me, hoping to magically reveal hidden traces of poison, but nothing appeared. Wherever the poison was, it was not hidden in that way.

Putting the chalice down for a moment, I went to the bed. It was very awkward, and I asked for forgiveness in advance, not really sure that the deceased lord would care. Lifting up his right hand first, I examined it closely. There was no scratch or trace of any abrasion on it, and so I went for the left this time. Here, I noticed a small bead of blood at the edge of his smallest finger. It was fresh, but was so tiny that only someone diligently looking could have found it.

I carefully picked up the chalice by the bowl this time. How had I, and the servant before me, not to mention Sir Matthew, escaped the same fate as Lord Henry? We had all picked up the chalice, but only one of us was dead. What was different here? I must admit I was stumped for a while, until I remembered one thing. Lord Henry always used two hands when he drank from the chalice, because of its long stem. The rest of us had picked it up with one hand near the bowl, only because it was empty. Placing the cup down, I examined the thorns of the rose bush, toward the bottom of

the stem. One of them was freshly sharpened to a point, and there was a tiny trace of blood.

So now I had figured out how the murder was committed, but one question remained. Who would have done it? To ask who could have would be a waste of time. Many people had access to this cup, which always remained on the lord's side table. There were, of course, the times it was sent to the kitchen for washing every few weeks, but the last cleaning had been a while ago. Disgusting, I know, but that was Lord Henry. He also did not have his chambers locked, so nearly anyone in the castle, including myself, could have prepared the chalice.

So I was stuck with the question of who, and then the natural follower, why? Sitting on a chair near the still burning fireplace, I made a mental note of all the lord's enemies. He had only a few, and most lived far away at the capital. In order to get at him, they would have had to send hired help. As far as people close to him, there was only the children, Sir Matthew, Ector, myself, and Galin, the captain of the guard. I could scratch my name off for sure, and I knew my mentor had not done it. Sir Matthew was much too unimaginative to have done the deed, besides being reasonably chivalrous. If he wanted to kill the lord, he would have challenged him to a duel. I had to suppress a wicked chuckle at the thought of the most probable outcome. Don't get me wrong, I did like the tutor in a way, but right now he was the cause of my problems and I couldn't help but think darkly of him at the time. So this left the children and the captain of the guard. Normally I would have balked at the mere thought, but often what you think most unlikely can turn around and surprise you. I would have to investigate all four of them.

While I continued to wait in the unbearable silence, I had to wonder why any one of them would do it. The eldest son Eric was his father's favorite child, and the longer I thought about it, the more I realized he had no motive. He was four years younger than me, making him the ripe old age of sixteen. Lord Henry and his son did many things together, and there always appeared to be so much love between them. Even on the colder side of all this, Eric's gain at his father's death was not so great. Eric was the only son and would become the next lord of Glencoven now that his father was gone, but until his eighteenth birthday, he would need an advisor. The advisor or regent would have controlling power until the lord's son was of age, thus throwing my suspicions back on Sir Matthew, but the same argument could also be used against my mentor.

The next child of the lord was Engel, a year younger than her brother. She spent her days amidst the ladies of the castle gossiping about this and that. Seriously, I didn't think she paid enough attention to things that really matter to even be capable of killing her father. Not to mention, she would be missed in the social circles if she left for any other reason than to eat and sleep. Sometimes I wonder how that woman does it, but that is another story. I also tend to pardon her from the list of suspects, simply because she would have no motive. Engel lived in luxury and comfort thanks to her father, and to have him dead was to throw that world of bliss into jeopardy.

The third child was actually the eldest, but it comes natural to mention her last, simply because she is the last one that Lord Henry would worry about. Don't get me wrong, though. It wasn't because he didn't love her, but because she was far more independent than the other two. I'm speaking of Merissa, the lord's stepdaughter. Lord Henry had the worst misfortune concerning wives. Merissa's mother had passed away when she was only one, and then the last wife died the year after Engel was born. Since then, the lord resigned to living as a single parent, and spent more time with his children because of it.

Merissa kept mostly to herself, though she was often found speaking with those who visited the castle from far off. If anyone could tell you of news in other lands, Merissa was the one. She was just a few months younger than me, and to say I admired her would be an understatement. Yes, as

they say, I was sweet on her, but that doesn't mean I couldn't consider her a suspect. She would have been the lord's direct heir, if Eric hadn't been born, but I hardly think she wanted to rule. No, for Merissa, escaping the confines of castle life for adventure would be more her thing. The thought often crossed my mind, too, as the warmer weather was fast approaching. Still, I couldn't come up with a reason she would have to kill her own father. He never tried to hinder her from leaving the castle, and I fear she will leave towards the end of summer. She's pretty good with a blade and can hold her own. Besides, she loved her father just as much as the other two children.

This left Galin. As Lord Henry's captain of the guard for more than twenty years, it felt almost traitorous to even put him on the list of suspects. A man more faithful to his liege lord was not to be found, even in the capital at the King's court. This was probably because Galin's faithfulness to the lord was unconditional. They had been friends as young men, and though Galin came from the ranks of the lower class freemen, Lord Henry treated him as an equal. This respect, combined with a strong friendship, would never produce a murderer. But what then? I was left without suspects based on this assumption. It was with heartbreak that I had to accept the fact that one of these decent people was the killer.

There was a voice on the other side of the door, and I hurried to stand aside just in case it was opened. I wasn't a minute too late. I had barely flattened myself against the wall when the door swung open and the castle priest, Father Eugene, entered with two of his assistants. From what I gathered before leaving, they were intending to take the lord's body to the chapel. Apparently it had been Lord Henry's wish to be taken to the chapel during his last hours of life, and then buried in the family crypt beneath the castle. His last hours had not been in the chapel, of course, but the good priest intended to carry out the wish as far as he could, in respect for the deceased lord.

I took the opportunity to escape while the priest and his help were busy. The guards stood just outside looking straight forward, and I soon left them behind. I really had no idea what I should do first. I wanted to go investigate the lord's children, but at the time I didn't know where they might be. Taking the stairs, I climbed up through one of the towers to the castle rampart. There were men standing guard as usual, and to the casual observer, you might think nothing had happened that morning.

The sun had risen high into the sky by this point, but the clouds had obscured it behind their gray curtain. The dark clouds moved with a sluggish persistence, and I guessed that they wouldn't be here till later in the evening. I was sort of glad, as a bolt of lightning lit the sky in their wake. The flash sent shivers down my spine. I never liked thunder, not even at the best of times, and right now my nerves were already on edge. Guess it sounds kind of foolish, but I am sure you have a few things you don't like, too!

I don't know if it was fate, or just a lucky break on my part, that led me to climb to the castle rampart. I had no reason to be here, but I guess I hoped to think better up in the fresh air. The change from the confining room was welcome. In any case, during one of the flashes from the storm, I turned away and saw a lone figure further down the wall. It was a woman standing with her hair flying behind her, and I knew it could be no one else but the Lady Merissa. She loved to take walks up on the ramparts, often simply because she wanted to be alone. Standing now with her gaze towards the storm, she reminded me of a lone tree on a hill, daring the wind and rain to do their worst.

She would have to be the first one I investigated, because of all the suspects, I desperately wanted to know if she was guilty or not. Taking the steps down to the lower level of the wall, I walked quietly up to her. She was clutching a finely woven shawl about her shoulders, and the lines



of tears were plainly evident on her face. I felt terrible intruding on her privacy like this, but at the moment I couldn't afford to break the invisibility spell, since I still had to investigate the others.

"Father," she said, gazing off into the heart of the storm. "Where are you now? Will we meet again on some distant shore?" I knew in that moment she could not have done it. Call it a feeling, but I knew. Forgetting my current condition, I gently placed a hand upon her shoulder. She jumped, naturally, and I quickly drew back in surprise at my own stupidity. Her eyes darted back and forth, and I knew she was genuinely scared. I was going to speak up, but something kept me from doing so.

"Who's there?" she asked. Then after a moment's reflection, she seemed to guess. "Derrin? Is that you?" She put her hand out like a blind person, trying to feel what she could not see. I had to make an important decision. Reveal myself and risk her giving the alarm, or remain hidden from her? I did not know if she would hand me over to Sir Matthew, and once in his hands, I would lose all hope of proving my mentor's innocence.

"Merissa," I said, throwing myself against better judgment into the hands of fate. She started once, but then a curious look came into her eyes.

"Derrin, I knew it was you somehow. What happened to you? How did you become... invisible?" she asked, still searching for me with her hand. I placed my right hand in hers, and she briefly explored my face with her other one. Then, just as I began to relax, a sudden anger filled her eyes.

"Wait!" she cried, suddenly seizing my invisible wrist. "Sir Matthew is hunting for you. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't hand you over to him or the guards!"

"Wait, please, I can explain." I said, trying to lower my voice. The guards were not looking in our direction yet, but if she kept shouting like that, I was sure they would take notice.

"You had better," was the cold reply.

I explained the story to her up that point, telling her everything I had discovered about her father's death, as well. She stared in disbelief at the place I was supposed to be, even though she couldn't see me, and didn't say a word until I had finished. My stomach growled at the end of my account, adding a humorous touch to this very serious drama. She either did not hear it, or she just ignored it. Her mind was working, and I could see she was going over all I had said.

"Besides, if I'm lying to you, why would I still be here?" I asked. "You don't catch guilty invisible people hanging around very often." She didn't answer, and I breathed a quick sigh of relief.

"It just can't be, Derrin," she said at length. "I know my stepbrother and stepsister, and they just could not have done it, either of them. As far as Galin, I know no man more loyal to this family."

"That was my feeling, too," I said, taking her other hand in mine. "But who else is there, then?"

"I don't know," she replied, "Too many people could have, but whatever the reasons, they must have been few. My father had his faults, but nothing worth killing him for. He was well loved by all the people. Who would do this, Derrin? I believe that Ector is innocent, and I believe you've told me the truth about yourself, too. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know Merissa," I replied. "Where do I start? Once I've figured that out, I can make a plan. Do you know when my mentor will go to trial? I know Sir Matthew will insist on that."

"The trial will be tomorrow morning," she replied, looking down at her feet. "Sir Matthew dedicated this day to the memory of my father. I hope he is now with my mother again." I decided against reminding her of the second wife and simply nodded in agreement. Later I thought how pointless that was since she couldn't see me, but she must have taken my silence as an agreement.

She smiled faintly, and my heart skipped a beat despite the circumstances.

"One thing I do know. I need to eat in order to keep going," I said, breaking the spell of the moment. "I fear breakfast is gone and the midday meal is almost over."

"Not quite," she replied quickly. "I did not eat much, but I can get some from the kitchen. Where will you be?"

"I think I shall go back to Ector's study and see if there is anything in his books I can use to help us," I said. There was another awkward moment. "You do want to help me find the murderer, don't you?"

"Of course!" she replied quickly, her eyes widening in surprise. "I will not allow an innocent man be punished because I was too uninterested to help. My father would not have wanted that in any case."

"Good," I said, overjoyed that she would be willing to help me. "Oh, and thank you for getting me something to eat." I noticed a hesitancy in her manner, like she was unsure if she should let me go. Her hands were still holding mine.

"Look," I said, slipping one hand free. "You want to make sure I am where I said I'm going to be, right?"

"Derrin, it is not that I do not trust you so much, but I hardly know you," she said. "We have spoken on many occasions, but I also know that you carry many secrets with you. I have never gotten beyond the mask you wear." This was a surprise to me, and I had to think about the impression I had been giving her all this time.

"Well, I will give you a token for releasing me," I said, reaching around my neck. "Hold out your hand." When she did, I dropped a leather strand that held my most valued possession into her hand. It was simple golden ring with small round ruby set in it.

"This is the only memento I have left from my parents. My mother's ring, which is very precious to me. Don't lose it," I said. The ring became visible as it left my touch. "I will not leave without it, and as long as it's in your keeping, you hold my heart in your hand." She smiled suddenly, and a strange feeling came over me, like I had just said the right thing.

"That will do," she replied, putting it around her own beautiful neck.

She continued to smile as she walked away quickly on her errand of mercy. I, in turn, with a little extra skip in my step, headed for the east tower. As I passed people on the way, I had to note the strange experience that invisibility lends you. People never know you're there, obviously, and you can catch up on so much gossip. Overhearing rude comments about others, and laughing at the guard picking his nose when he thinks no one is looking. This spell could be a powerful weapon for anyone planning to kill, steal, or just cause mischief. It gave me a new respect for my mentor. Ector could have used the spell to get away, but he showed much greater depth of character by not taking the easy way out. Silently I wished to be more like him as I grew older.

Ector's room was cold when I entered it, and to save time, I cast a simple fire spell on the logs sitting in the fireplace. A thin stream of flame ran from my fingers, igniting the dry logs. I sat on a stool by the fire for a few moments, warming my cold hands. When the room was finally warming, I went to my mentor's bookshelves. The shelves lined one entire wall, and last time I counted, there was exactly one thousand two hundred ninety six books in his collection. I corrected myself, though. The collection was up by one. Geric's Journeys. Not really thinking about it, I placed the ladder we used for reaching the top shelf and climbed up to retrieve the newest volume.

There was a tap at the door, and I paused for a moment. The old oak door swung open, and Merissa walked in. I was surprised at how quickly she had gotten the food. Surprised, but pleased.

She looked about for a moment, noticing the fire and the ladder set up.

“Derrin?”

“Yes, I’m here,” I said, grabbing the book from the top of the shelf. The blue crystal on its cover glittered in the light shed from the fire. I had to watch my step as I got down the ladder, though. It is much more difficult than you might think, considering I can’t see my own feet and where I placed them. I almost slipped on the last step but caught myself in time.

She came to the sound of my voice, and I set the book down for a moment while taking the food she offered. I hardly said thank you before I was digging in. I did notice, though, that she was looking at the book strangely. She ran her hand over the smooth crystal, and then suddenly she seemed to recognize the book.

“Where did you get this?” she asked quickly.

“My mentor got it from some friend of his that was just passing by. A bard named Burin. Ever heard of him?” I asked back.

“Yes, in the gardens yesterday afternoon. I spoke with him and found he was from the capital. I also remember him having this book at that time,” she replied in that tone of voice that let me know she was thinking. “He told me that he had a friend to see last night before he left, and I didn’t see him again. I heard he left in a hurry.” The food on my fork dropped back to the plate. Of course! That was it! How I had not guessed before, I’ll never know. I jumped up from my seat with a shout, and uttered the words Ecthor had taught me to lift temporary spells. I was visible again and found myself dancing around the room in pure joy. Merissa was surprised by my reappearance and the sudden reaction, and it took a moment for me to calm down enough to tell her what she had just discovered.

“It was the bard, Merissa! It was he that did it, and my mentor is saved!” I cried, though at the moment she didn’t quite understand. To save time, I will explain what happened after the discovery. Merissa and I went to see Sir Matthew, and though he was thoroughly distrustful of me as usual, we got him to send out a party in search of the bard Burin. He was caught and brought back for questioning. One thing my mentor had never known about his old friend was that besides being a great entertainer, he was also a common assassin.

Burin had been hired by one of Lord Henry’s enemies in the capital. He had been given certain information as to the lord’s habits, such as drinking with two hands from the chalice, by one of our own guards. The poor fool didn’t know what the bard had intended, and the plot was set. Burin apparently never meant to throw the suspicion on Ecthor. He had honestly taken the opportunity to deliver the book to his old friend out of genuine friendship before preparing the lord’s chalice. I found it almost ironic, but then that’s just me.

In our realm, assassins are normally seen as the lesser criminal, while their employers receive full punishment. The reason we have such a law is to encourage the end of such a business. Usually the system works, and our list of would-be employers have dwindled over the years. Burin made the wise choice of revealing the man who paid him, and a certain lord in the capital who shall remain nameless received death by order of the King. Burin got off with banishment from the King’s land, mostly thanks to Ecthor’s intervention for his old friend. There was also the matter of a curse that would bring about the bard’s instant death should he so much as cross our boundaries. My mentor sometimes comments on his decision there, and admitted it might have been the wrong thing to do, but I notice that he never makes a move to correct the supposed error.

Eric has taken his father’s place this last year as Lord of Glencoven, with Sir Matthew and Ecthor agreeing to be co-advisers. There wasn’t too much respect lost between the two over the

unfortunate affair, and the tutor seeks to be more amiable these days. Engel continues to waste her life away in meaningless jabbering with the ladies of the castle. I just don't understand it. My mentor has just suggested I tell you what has happened as far as Merissa and I are concerned, but I think that is a piece for another story. Let's just say she hasn't given me my memento back yet.

Life isn't easy when you're a wizard's apprentice, but I think solving these mysteries can be a lot harder. When you are the first, you don't have to worry too much about other people. When you're the second, people are usually the reason for all your hard labor. I struggled with the thought that people I cared about could possibly be guilty of murder, and in so doing, it opened my eyes to the fact that the real reason for learning something or doing anything is to help those around you. If you aren't doing it for that reason, I'd call you selfish, but maybe that's too blunt. How about I simply say this. Your life may need new direction, if all roads lead back to self.

Well, there's one of my stories, and now I see that my mentor is drifting off to sleep by the fire. That sounds like a good idea to me. I've just thought of a title for this story. I'll call it 'The Fatal Chalice'. It has a nice ring to it.

**THE END**

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## CHAPTER TWO: NIGHT VISITOR

Upon reaching Flower Land, guided by the positions of the moon and stars, Er-Shon flew straight to the highest window in one of the topmost towers of the Caliph's palace. He easily recognized it from his crystal gazing. In it was Jonadan's bedchamber. He woke the youngster with a wave of the open scent bottle under his nose. The startled boy, to better see the portrait held by Er-Shon, sat up. At the same time, he breathed in the heady concoction. An expert on flowers (but not girls' smiles!), Jonadan had never smelled anything like it, so he took another deep breath.

"Who are you, sir, to so boldly bring me this dream?" said Jonadan to the wizard.

"I am Er-Shon, a great wizard from the misty mountains of the Middle Kingdom. My daughter would very much like to meet you, young man. That is her picture and also her fragrance."

"Ah! So I'm not dreaming, after all!" exclaimed the boy. "How will I meet your daughter, brave wizard? For I know that the Middle Kingdom lies many leagues from here and is closely guarded by white cloud magic."

"This does indeed call for magic. And, since I happen to have a crystal bowl with me, please speak to my daughter and let her answer you through its powers." After saying this, with a silken swishing of his midnight blue robes, Er-Shon revealed a jade bowl identical to Ra-Sha's.

Displaying it with a flourish, he cautioned the young Caliph, "Think well before you speak, for you may each say but one sentence to the other!"

Looking through the suddenly clear crystal, Jonadan spoke with all his heart: "Of my land's many flowers" — he meant girls too — "not one compares with you, my dear new friend Ra-Sha!" Entranced, he couldn't help staring.

Er-Shon was amused at Ra-sha's waking surprise. She'd fallen asleep over her studies, poor child. Her cats, as usual, adorned her tousled hair. Though startled and slightly flushed, she replied honestly, making him proud.

"I was just dreaming about having you as my friend, Jonadan, and now my dreams are coming true!" The crystal clouded over as she finished speaking.

Er-Shon winked knowingly at the young man, then bowed low, tucking his arms into his wide sleeves.

"I will see what can be arranged between my vizier and yours," he said, his almond eyes turning up with wrinkles of happiness at the corners. His lovely long mustaches, so like a pleased cat's whiskers, turned up too.

Even though he was magically powerful, Er-Shon was a diplomat of the highest order, dignified and charming. That is how he had met his Cloud Princess wife, Ra-Sha's mother. She had been stolen away by a black mage, and he still searched for her without success. He missed her, and did kind deeds to honor her memory. She would want the best for their daughter, he knew, especially with regard to a future husband.

The wizard's polite manner, as well as Ra-Sha's simple innocent charm, had won over the young Caliph. He was so lonely, since his vizier was strict with him, that he welcomed this exciting change in his life. Thus, Jonadan was determined to have an audience with Mighty Mukdim, his uncle and vizier, first thing in the morning.

The wizard left him the girl's lovely portrait and the mysterious bottled scent. Away he flew on his sweetly jingling magic carpet, returning to White Cloud Fortress in the Middle Kingdom.

## CHAPTER THREE: CAT GIRL

At home in her tower, Ra-Sha joyfully whirled around her study chamber, dancing with her cats. As the sun raised just enough to peek into her room, she drew the curtain over her window and fell into blissful slumber.

But some wakeful cats clambered about getting into trouble, especially her favorite, large, fluffy Silver Fur. His blue eyes were like two deep moon pools. He ended up reeking of the attar of roses he had spilled while chasing his fellows. No matter how hard he tried, he could not lick it off. He had discovered that attar's smell was far better than its taste. Ugh!

When Er-Shon returned, cheerful carpet bells woke his daughter, who told him, "Father, I was dreaming about the Land of Flowers. It was a nightmare about the Mighty Mukdim. What if he does not approve of me?"

Said Er-Shon, "You are a wise daughter, and I have thought of a way we can guarantee your safety as you investigate the household of your new friend. Trust me, and do not be afraid. I will give you some changing potion for the first time. This will allow you to pass as the pet of Jonadan, a 'gift' from our vizier, my cousin Ur-Khan."

Ra-Sha said, "Yes, Father, that is a perfect plan!" She drank the potion and changed into a sleek, shiny black she-panther. She had always wondered what it would be like to be a cat. Stretching luxuriously, lapping sweet cream, purring, she enjoyed touching noses with all her furry friends to say goodbye. Then father and daughter boarded the magic carpet and set off for Flower Land.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CHANGELINGS

Silver Fur, left behind, decided to investigate the dregs in the bottle of changing potion. It tasted just like cream to him, so he licked away the few remaining drops, and curled up for a catnap.

When he awoke, he too was changed. How he frightened himself when he attempted to call his fellows! Gone was his dulcet, melodic cat voice, replaced by loud roars that echoed back at him from the Fortress walls. And the more distressed he became, the louder his voice roared. The other cats ran from him and hid. He too tried to run away from his own voice, but he ran right into a nearby mirror.

Staring, he did not recognize the large white lion with golden eyes that stared back. His huge feet scratched the mirror with diamond-tipped claws when he jumped at his reflection. Yes, he was a very hungry lion, whose belly rumbles almost drowned out his roars.

\* \* \*

Jonadan was happy to receive the wizard Er-Shon's gift of a she-panther. Said he, "I will name you 'Ra-kha' to honor my friend, Ra-Sha, and her land's ruler, her father's cousin, royal Ur-Khan. We will go everywhere together, and you can guard me in my sleep at night." Jonadan did not want any more surprise visits.

To better aid his daughter from now on, Er-Shon had magically gifted her with the ability to understand and speak to any animal. This power was soon to come in quite handy.

\* \* \*

One day Ra-kha was wandering the palace gardens while Jonadan attended to his studies. She came upon a high stone gate on dingy brass hinges with a half moon carved in it. Just as she was about to paw it open, she heard a strange dry voice coming from nearby. Looking up, she saw a large gray lizard sunning himself on the gray rim of a goldfish pond.

"My name is Unmiyow," said the lizard. "I used to be Jonadan's snow leopard kitten before Ssana-the-Snake-Woman, Mighty Mukdim's chief wife, changed me into a chameleon. I displeased her by hissing at her too many times. Were I you, I would not go through that gate."

"Pleased to meet you, Unmiyow, but what harm could come to me in a flower garden? Those roses smell nice! I am, after all, the Ra-kha. Surely, you have heard of me by now?" Ra-kha replied proudly, in the dry lizard language. (Jonadan had spoiled her with fine meats, rich milk, and cakes made with candied rose petals, letting her recline at the foot of his bed on soft silken cushions to guard him. This made her haughty.)

"Excuse me, Ra-kha, but I think I'm in love," said Unmiyow, staring down at his reflection in the pond. How he preened, raising and lowering his lizard's ruff, turning this way and that to admire the effect.

"That is only your own reflection, Unmiyow!" said Ra-kha. She patted the water with her paw to show him it was not a lady chameleon.

"There is a lesson here for you too, mistress Ra-kha. Never puff up just to impress yourself. You see where it got me. Besides, there are things that sting in any garden. Now, do you want to listen to a little more advice?" The chameleon turned to whip a fly from the air with his long sticky tongue.

"Say on, Unmiyow, for I think you are wiser in the ways of this land, which is all new to me." Ra-kha lay down gracefully, but humbly, by the pond to hear him out.

Said Unmiyow, "What suits you best here, Rha-kha?"

"I love to follow Jonadan, learn about his wonderful flowers, and watch his kind ways with his people," Rha-ka answered. "Those goldfish are lovely as jewels too. I could watch them all day and not be bored."

(Though trying now to make up for her earlier airs, she just couldn't help thinking how tasty they looked.)

"Tell the fish how pretty they are; is it polite to talk about them in their presence as if they weren't here?" So Ra-kha took Unmiyow's suggestion.

"Thank you for the compliment," replied the goldfish in watery voices, staying just out of reach of her playful paws. (They were no fools.)

A child of the Middle Kingdom, Ra-kha was cautious of new alliances, yet ever alert to their advantages. She knew that friends, like flowers for fragrant potions, were worth more to her than rare gems or even magic.

"What suits you least about Flower Land, Ra-kha?" Unmiyow interrupted Ra-kha's reverie.

"I've prowled the palace, listening at keyholes, occasionally peeking too. I've overheard workers in the fields and gardens. Most do not trust Jonadan's uncle, the vizier Mukdim. They say he's really a black mage!" Ra-kha paced restlessly and growled when she answered.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SNAKE WOMAN

"I'm sorry to tell you some really bad news," said Unmiyow. "Mukdim is a black mage, but Ssana is the one to avoid — greedy, vain, and cruel. When Mukdim asked her to marry him, I was hiding in the bushes, in that very garden beyond the gate, still a snow leopard kitten. 'Let us wed,' said Mukdim, 'and share the wealth of Flower Land as its rulers some day. I'll rid myself of my useless nephew, just as I did his parents, whom I buried in this garden using my dark arts. They gave their lives, and the last of their magic spells, to spare their son. But I will soon find a way around their protection. This I vow!'"

Unmiyow paused to catch another fly, since speeches made him feel hungry. Ra-kha listened politely, but her twitching tail betrayed her increasing discomfort. The chameleon continued. "Ssana, allowed her one sentence of introduction, said thus, 'Mukdim, if we are married, and you decide to take another wife, remember that my kitchen holds many sharp knives.'

"The marriage, predictably, has been a loveless one, and Mukdim made a mistake by stealing another wife in order to produce an heir. That wife was called 'Cloud Princess'."

Hearing her mother's name, Ra-kha leapt up, her tail thrashing like a black whip. Though Ra-Sha never knew her, Er-Shon had often told her about her mother, her kindness and beauty. Unmiyow, not knowing that this was really Ra-Sha in disguise, feared that she had decided to devour him. Meanwhile, the gold fish thought they would be dessert! There was a lot of scampering and splashing.

"I'm sorry," said Ra-kha. "I think a bee just stung me. Please continue, Unmiyow." She settled onto the dirt with crossed paws to show her peaceful intentions.

From the other side of the pond, Unmiyow cautioned, "We'd better not make so much noise this close to that snake Ssana's garden of flesh-eating roses. Once Cloud Princess's tears watered them. Now Ssana waters with tears of her own rage."

Ra-kha said, trying not to let her voice quaver, "Ah, so that is what lies beyond the half moon gate. Tell me more."

Unmiyow continued, gulping, "Ssana turned the bones of Caliph Namil and his Calipha, Muna, into roots. They bloomed as a white rose and a red rose, as soon as she added Cloud Princess's tears. When Cloud Princess would have none of Mukdim, he sent her to Ssana, whose wicked sorcery goes beyond mere knives!" He could not go on.

The fish had to finish the sad tale he'd shared with them. But first the fish asked Ra-kha, "Are you sure you do not feel the least bit hungry?"

Ra-kha replied, "Not at all. I'll lower my head and close my eyes while you speak, so that you may feel no anxiety." (She did this, too, because she did not want them to see her softly falling panther tears.)

The fish told the rest. "We watched with Unmiyow as Ssana beat Cloud Princess, and worked her long hours in the gardens under the burning sun, after shaving her head. We roiled the pond waters whenever she came to cool herself, so she would not see her beauty spoiled. The birds distracted her too with their comings and goings. Though she had little enough to eat, she always saved crumbs for all of us, and even brought bugs for Unmiyow. Dungeon rats kept her company, weaving a blanket from their fur for her, and buried her in it when she died, as the birds sang her dirge. Oh wicked, wicked Ssana!

"Cloud Princess could speak with any animal. She told us how she'd been stolen from the wizard Er-Shon after giving birth to their daughter, Ra-Sha, she who is to become Jonadan's bride."



Ra-kha sighed, and said, "Thank you, my friends. I'll warn my master if I can, and Er-Shon and his daughter too."

Should I succeed, you'll be rewarded with more than crumbs." Head and tail drooping, she padded slowly away, deep in thought.

## CHAPTER SIX: CAT AND SNAKE

Ssana had used well the long, boring, loveless time of their marriage to study Mukdim's arts, and to turn them to her own advantage. A lethal beauty, Ssana — Mighty Mukdim himself feared her strong sorcery.

Into Ssana's terrible household crept Ra-Sha, disguised as the panther Ra-kha. Despite Ssana's misgivings, she was forced, for diplomatic reasons, to allow Jonadan to receive this truly exceptional gift from the vizier Ur-Khan of the Middle Kingdom. (The crafty Ur-Khan approved his cousin Er-Shon's deception, of course.)

"Cloud Princess!" Thus hissed Ssana one night, as she discovered Ra-Sha's portrait and potion, hidden by Jonadan.

He'd put them beneath a loose stone in his chamber. But she had only to slither under the door in snake form, tasting the attar-scented air with her tongue, ignoring the apparently soundly sleeping panther.

Ra-kha, pretending to sleep, watched through narrowed green eyes, not moving a muscle. Her sharp panther ears did not betray that she heard and understood perfectly.

\* \* \*

The following night Ra-kha sniffed out Ssana's snaky trail. It led up winding tower stairs to a high hidden lair. Though Ssana kept the creaking door closed and locked, Ra-kha could still peek and sniff. Through a large keyhole shaped like a screaming mouth bleeding rust, Ra-kha spied on Ssana.

Ra-kha heard, "My pretty Ra-Sha, I will treat you as I did your mother. Then, after I've captured your essence, I have only to spread it on myself, mixed with the fragrant potion you supplied. How convenient!

Next, I will take your place as Jonadan's bride, know a joyous new life, and abandon that fat, smelly, dried-up Mukdim. My Jonadan and I will have many children, and see to it that they are brought up properly in the dark arts. My family will rule the entire world."

Mumbling incantations, Ssana stirred a fetid magic broth that boiled in a sooty cauldron. This she had concocted from the rotting carcasses of unlucky animals who'd displeased her, adding the blood of flesh-eating roses from her ghastly garden (fed by remains of anyone else who'd displeased her). The fumes gagged the panther Ra-kha. She hastily departed, trying not to cough, fur standing on end as she descended the gloomy spiral stairs.

Ra-kha knew that she must get her father Er-Shon's help, since only white cloud magic could save them all. But Er-Shon was with Mukdim. With his nose for rare scents, Mukdim had also found Ra-Sha's picture and potion. Then the wily vizier made foul plans of his own.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DEADLY BANQUET

“How generous of you to give this banquet for me, Mukdim!” Er-shon was glowing with the effects of too much rose wine. It was beginning to loosen his tongue.

“Oh no, I must thank you for suggesting the betrothal of your gifted daughter to my noble nephew, the Caliph Jonadan. The fine couple will give you grandchildren, and bring our kingdoms closer in harmony and mutual profit!” Thus proclaimed that flattering liar, Mukdim.

He had drugged Er-Shon’s rose wine to put him at ease, and to steal his secrets.

As he plied Er-shon with more sweet meats, Mukdim clapped his hands, and motioned to his trembling waiters.

“Send in the dancing girls! Let the musicians play for us!”

Since Mukdim dared not look at another woman for fear of his wife (and he was stingy too), his musicians were merely enchanted captive birds. The dancing girls were really starving rats brought up in cages from the dungeon. They all wore the glamour of his spells. The sweets were real enough, though, since the only thing mighty about Mukdim was his large appetite.

Er-Shon, falling into a deadly stupor, was barely saved from Mukdim’s sharp knife by his invisible shield of white cloud magic. It also protected him from the pointy beaks and claws of hungry bird musicians and the nibbling caresses of starving rat dancing girls. Alas! He’d let slip the hiding place of his magic carpet and its traveling commands, babbling in his sleep.

Even the warning off-key jangling of the carpet’s bells did not awaken Er-Shon to Mukdim’s departure for the misty mountains of the Middle Kingdom. The rats and birds skittered around and over the snoring wizard, cleaning up the banquet’s remains.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: REUNION

Mukdim laughed into the wind, trying not to look down, since that made him queasy. Said he, “At last I’ve found a worthy bride in this tender, fragrant, blossom, Ra-Sha.”

“She’s a little thin, but once I’ve fattened her up to my liking, she will give me many heirs. Our ten sons will be handsome and cunning like me. Our ten daughters will be comely enchantresses, eager to please. Best of all, I’ll be rid of that witch, Ssana-the-Snake, forever. Besides, she’s a terrible cook, and always stinks like a privy. Sweet dreams, Er-Shon! Sleep forever!”

\* \* \*

Er-Shon awoke to a cold wet nose, and a rain of salty tears. Heavy hearted, Rha-ka had come searching for her father. Chasing the discordant chiming of his carpet’s bells, she’d been too late to catch the shadowy figure aboard it. Although relieved to find her father, she was worried about his carpet.

“Your tears have saved me from a fatal slumber, Rha-Sha. We’ve been tricked by black magic. I’ll change you back to yourself so that we may work together on this problem.” Er-Shon chanted a spell while sprinkling rose water over the panther, and, poof! His daughter knelt there shivering, robed only in her long hair. Gesturing magically, he drew some clothing from a deep pocket of his own robes, and she felt the comfort of a silken gown and sandals once again.

“Father, who was that on your magic carpet? We must find Jonadan, and leave here.

Mukdim and Ssana were my mother's undoing. If we cannot gather enough white cloud magic, they will be ours as well." She shuddered, thinking also of flesh-eating roses, her animal friends' suffering, and Ssana's mad plans.

## CHAPTER NINE: KING-SIZED SURPRISE

As Er-Shon was listening to Ra-Sha's tearful tale, Silver Fur was having his own adventures. Transformed into a lion, he needed to feed a lion-sized appetite. Famous for his good nose, he easily invaded the pantry where the cheeses were stored, and jumped up to snatch one. He finished by quenching his thirst on the milk kept cooling in Cloud Fortress's well. His long body stretched to lap-lap-lap with his large tongue. Once satisfied, he rolled over, burped loudly, licked his fur, and then snuggled into a dark corner for a well-deserved nap. Soon the other cats found him. He smelled of attar, now his familiar scent, so they cuddled up with their big warm friend.

Thus Silver Fur did not hear Mukdim land the magic carpet atop Er-shon's mountain hide-away to tiptoe in looking for Ra-Sha. The sly vizier, finding no one at home, scented the attar. Its aroma teased him.

"Ah, wonderful! Ra-Sha must be here hiding." Mukdim sneezed as he entered the darkened basement chamber where the cats drowsed.

Silver Fur awoke to what seemed to be a new playmate. Trying to make out the dark figure, he got lazily to his feet.

First, Mukdim was set upon by the pack of overly friendly housecats, shaken off by Silver Fur. Then playful, groggy Silver Fur gave chase in a leisurely manner. The portly Mukdim, surprised to discover the animals instead of their mistress, also found that fear gave his feet wings. In his desperate haste, his evil spells fled his mind as well.

## CHAPTER TEN: SAND, SEA, AND SKY

"Ra-kha!" Jonadan called his beloved she-panther softly, so as not to awaken the household. She was gone from the foot of his couch. Where could she be? He knew that, like all cats, his pet had a keen nose.

"Aha! Since Mukdim is giving a betrothal banquet for Er-Shon, the revels and aroma of food must have enticed her. That's where I'll find her and maybe, the Fair Flower, Ra-Sha, her darling former mistress, if I'm lucky." (He spoke his thoughts aloud in his excitement.)

At the banquet chamber, Jonadan was, indeed, most pleasantly surprised to find Ra-Sha. But she ran to him sobbing, raven tresses flying.

Said she, "My father, the wizard Er-Shon, will now exact vengeance upon Flower Land! He's called his cloud cloak and his carpet. The carpet stolen by your uncle, Mukdim, will return to my father, no matter where it is. He's commanded me to await him on the topmost tower, and to bring you with me. He means you no harm, but not so Ssana. First, though, we must run below to save my animal friends — Unmiyow, the goldfish, the dungeon rats, and the birds."

Jonadan's trusting heart had suspected nothing. He said, dismayed, "So all the rumors about Ssana are true."

\* \* \*

As Er-Shon spoke weird words of summoning, his cloak of white cloud magic coalesced from the air around him. The cloak answered him eerily in ancient tongues with a multitude of voices — high, low, loud, soft. The magic carpet lay far off in White Cloud Fortress's tower room.

Fleeing Silver Fur and the cat hoard, Mukdim had jumped onto the tinkling carpet just as it rose, summoned to obey its true master, Er-Shon.

Zooming along much too quickly, Mukdim held on with all his strength, and almost reached Ssana's tower. But the carpet's urgent mission made it rid itself of its unwelcome burden over the palace gardens. Giving a little flip, the carpet dropped Mukdim into his wife's flesh-eating garden of roses. Their strong scent began to drain Mukdim's will. His magic finery saved him from being eaten alive, yet held him fast among the thorns. He began to tremble when he looked above and saw Er-Shon on his carpet.

Er-Shon's somber expression contorted with righteous rage as he stood on the now silent carpet. Then the sky around him darkened, hiding the sun. Flowers drooped and died under his glare. The wind howled like a mad thing, whipping his cloud cloak about him. Its voices cried out.

Below, Ssana stood clutching her hostages. Her sorcerous web had snared Jonadan and Ra-Sha, their cages of rats, the birds, a large bowl of goldfish, and the huge golden chameleon draping Jonadan's shoulders. But Ssana's face was bone-white with fear. Her magic was weakening, since she used most of her power to keep herself beautiful.

Before Ssana could strike, Mukdim sent a blue lightning bolt sizzling skyward to signal her for help. She, of course, was in no mood to help him, but knew that his power, matched with her own, might save her yet. So she sent a red bolt of her own to match it. The two met in a blinding bright violet flash, and a loud thunder crash.

THIS CALLED THE WATERS!

Off in the distance, up rose a great blue-green wall of water, foaming and roaring as it advanced, shaking the ground. It would cover Flower Land. Meanwhile, Ssana had dropped Jonadan and Ra-Sha onto the tower's balcony. She planned to fling them into the flood waters she'd called.

The trapped Mukdim screamed, sobbed and pleaded, but he had served his purpose, and she heeded him not. Her face was quite plain now, as was her purpose.

"You youngsters remind me of gaping fish, soon to find your home with the rest of the people in the sea below. Go there then — and rule — side by side."

But as Ssana's dagger-like fingernails reached to prod the couple, she found that Unmiyow had sharp lizard jaws. They snapped her finger off, just like that!

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: WHITE CLOUD MAGIC

The distraction of the wounded Ssana's green blood pouring forth let Er-Shon reverse her last spell. His magic flung her down to join her husband in the sea below. Since she had used the last of her power to break her fall, her outer appearance matched her inner ugliness. Her soft skin, lustrous hair, even her teeth, had turned green and slimy. Her rich robes turned into ragged seaweed.

Wrapping Jonadan and Ra-Sha in the ghostly protection of white cloud magic, Er-Shon confessed, "My anger made me so helpless that I could not reason or direct my magic. Therefore, must

I temper it with mercy.”

Er-Shon pointed to the two black magicians, binding them with the reverse fish-embodying spell. They would retain human shape, but could only live in a cold cave in the darkest depths of the sea Ssana had called into being. Flower Land’s fields were changed into anemones, coral, and other fantastic forms that thrive in the sea.

There was not room on Er-Shon’s carpet for other than his daughter, her betrothed, and their animal friends. Some of Flower Land’s people entered the kingdom of the cloak, and some that of the clouds, as spirits. Those in the clouds would send enough rain to keep fat Mukdim and his hideous wife imprisoned forever in the sea’s lightless depths. The ones in the cloak would sing the tale.

“This battle is well over,” declared the wizard Er-Shon. “We must now return home to the misty mountains of the Middle Kingdom. But, with a wedding to plan, how will I explain to my cousin, Ur-Khan, why there will be so few flowers for the celebration?” (Jonadan and Ra-Sha did not answer him. They were too busy sharing their first kiss.)

“Father, when we return home we could give changing potion to my friends. Then Unmiyow will become a snow leopard again. The rats will become the lovely ladies-in-waiting they seemed to be. The goldfish may grow big enough so that my cats won’t be as tempted to taste them as was my panther self.” (Safe in Jonadan’s arms, Ra-Sha, recalling her life among them, wished to bestow gifts on her animal allies.)

Before Er-Shon could answer, Jonadan spoke up. “I think my heart knew that you were my beloved, even in panther guise. Allow your friends to choose what they would be, just as we chose each other.”

“Your betrothed is right, daughter. Let them choose,” agreed Er-Shon. (Her answer was to kiss them both.)

“Look below! We’re home,” cried Ra-Sha. “What a magnificent lion — maybe he’s an early wedding gift from Ur-Khan...”

Sniffing attar of roses, she guessed it must be Silver Fur. “You sweet, naughty cat! Your taste of changing potion will let us ride you in our wedding and help us celebrate the greatest magic of all — LOVE.

**THE END**

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Continued from page 24

*Palmer wondered what was wrong. Why was everyone so afraid? The screaming and rushing and fighting clamored hard against his ears. The sky was dark with terrible clouds. Ahead were the ships.*

*"Only three," his mother said. She looked down at Palmer, her face pale and haggard. It was smudged and tear-stained. She picked him up so that he was suddenly looking backward as she ran with him. The people he saw behind him were afraid and angry. He saw two men fighting. One went down, his head red. The other picked up a baby girl and pushed forward.*

*Thunder ripped the air. It hurt Palmer's ears. He started crying and his mother held him closer. He heard his father. "We won't make it—we can't, there are just too many families and not enough ships."*

*"We can't give up," Palmer's mother said near breaking. "He can't die! I don't care if we don't make it. He just can't die!"*

*"I know that!"*

*There was new shouting ahead. Palmer turned to see men and women being forced off the nearest ferryship. Some women were sobbing while men struggled with security soldiers to stay on board. More Federation Security appeared about them. They were using Neurals to drive people back.*

*"Children only are being accepted," a voice boomed from the ships. "No parents may accompany their children—we just do not have room. You may choose to remain here with your children if you wish. More ships may come, as they are made available. But if you wish to have your children leave, you must part with them now. We are sorry. Every effort will be made to rescue you and reunite you with your children, but the situation is critical."*

*Palmer's mother stopped. She snuffed a sob. His father suffered beneath a dark scowling.*

*Somehow, Palmer suspected—death. His father waved at someone. Strong arms yanked him from his mother's grasp. He turned to see a security man taking him toward the ship. He turned back and started crying. He bucked and struggled to free himself, but the man's grasp was like metal. He saw his mother turn away, burying her face in his father's shoulder. Daddy watched after Palmer, his expression set—eyes almost glassy. Then, leading his mother, they started pushing back into the crowd. Soon they were lost among a thronging humanity straining forward, their children held high above them, waiting—waiting for rescue.*

*The security man rushed up the gangway and quickly deposited Palmer in a restraint. He shuddered from sobbing. His throat and chest ached terribly. His head hurt from the tears.*

*Suddenly there was an awful rumble and a lurching.*

*Chaos.*

*The ship sealed amid a clamor of alarms and flashing reds.*

*The world fell fast beneath the fleeing vessel. It crumbled below him. He was so confused—afraid. The world exploded—and ended, and Palmer couldn't cry . . .*

*. . . And opened his eyes to rich violet.*

*Everything was soft and quiet. Palmer took a deep breath and shuddered. Immediately, he felt the sorrow lift, but only artificially. Then he remembered how his arm should hurt—hurt enough to make him pass out. But there was no pain, just softness and cool pleasure in his arm. He ventured moving it. The pleasure lessened, but that was all.*

*"Don't move too much just yet," a quiet voice said from beyond the violet. The medic Palmer had spoken to earlier stood beside him, his clipboard under his arm. "Bad dreams?"*

*"Understatement." Palmer nodded.*

*"It happens sometimes. You feeling better now—about the dreams, I mean?"*

Again, Palmer nodded. "I saw my mother and father die again."

"That would be bad."

"Casualties?" Palmer managed with some effort. It was like fighting to stay awake during a boring talk.

"Four security men—Evans, Haarl, Weixler and Schefra."

"I knew two men died."

"Oh, and I guess you didn't know about Jenson?"

"Jenson," Palmer stirred awake. "Young Jenson, yes. But didn't he die on approach?"

"I'm sorry Colonel. His father died at the hands of the terrorist. He was trying to protect the nav panel and . . ."

"Oh," Palmer said, disbelieving. The terrible ache of his parent's death—all death—swelled up inside him again. "Please no, not him too."

"Try to sleep some more."

Palmer sank back while the Mediscanner removed grief and replaced it with numbness. Even so, a tear ran down his face and into his ear. The medic adjusted something beyond the violet, and Palmer fell immediately to sleep.

*"Martin Palmer must never receive a command over an evac operation." The general's mild voice spoke without emotion—but without rancor too.*

*"I disagree," Marla said with equal lack of passion in her voice. Marla was the military Hexibuneralist over Prediction. Her statement at this point in the proceedings carried tremendous weight.*

*"Martin Palmer has too much emotional baggage to permit him effective command ability," the general retorted, a slight annoyance creeping into his voice. "Sorry, Captain." Then to Marla, "Please explain yourself."*

*Marla smiled. "You mean he cares too much for people to send them to their deaths?"*

*The general flushed. "Captain Palmer cannot divorce himself from the strong motivations driving him to command such operations. It's nearly an obsession with him, and I say that it will impinge upon his ability to make rational, necessary – all be it regrettable – decisions in evacuating worlds."*

*Marla looked over at Palmer. She studied him, then turned back to the general. "General, I admit Captain Palmer's emotional involvement. As you say, he has a passion to command the evacuation of doomed worlds. But that passion stems from firsthand experience. I say that it will prove a force for good far beyond anything we can imagine."*

*Palmer stared at her. Her expression blazed. Nearly tangible electricity tinged the air. His heart pounded with that same fire; as he glanced from face to face, he saw a burning, enthralled expression on every member of the Commission. That was the only way he could describe what he saw—a burning.*

*The general persisted, though feebly now. "I wish to acknowledge officially that even though I protest the promotion, I mean no offense to Captain Palmer. His service over the past years has been outstanding. But please understand, Martin—I must protest. Surely even you can see that your very involvement in past events—seeing your own parents die during Hypermotility—it attaches you forever to them in a most unproductive way. You suffer from survival guilt. It's all right. It's entirely natural. But it cannot help but impact your performance. Understand? You will wind up making decisions based on family ties and hard-luck cases, rather than on merit. Faced with the possible end of humanity, merit of what is best for the race must prevail. You do understand this. I know you do—but you can't help yourself. In that single regard, you cannot function as an evac commander."*

Marla walked from the judgment seat to where Palmer sat in the center of the room. She looked at him—stared at him.

“Captain Palmer, there is some truth to what General Umalaa has stated. Your record of service is impeccable. That’s why you are being considered. Your volunteering to command evacuation task forces is almost unprecedented because of the high risks involved.

“But following orders is one thing. Giving them and assuming responsibility that may affect millions of lives is quite another. As a result, the turnover rate for evacuation commanders is high. If you are given this command, you will never again sleep well unassisted. That is an unfortunate fact among all evac commanders. There have never been exceptions.”

“I know that, Commissioner,” Palmer said evenly. It almost hurt to gaze into Marla’s incisive eyes.

“Do you think you will be able to make wise decisions?”

Palmer saw the death of his home planet in his memory. He closed his eyes and washed the image away. “I know the suffering first hand, Commissioner. I know how it feels to face death—to be subject to forces beyond your control.”

“Can you make cool, wise decisions under such terrible conditions?” the general interrupted harshly. Marla’s face darkened in anger for a moment, but she said nothing. She only gazed at Palmer.

“I know . . .” Palmer blurted frustrated, angry. “I know that no matter what decision I make, innocent people may die.”

There was a silence. Palmer looked at the floor, not daring to gaze at anyone. He felt defiled, ruined and heavy. He had never wanted to face such a question, though he knew it was the paramount question of command, particularly of evacuation task forces. Now he had voiced his worst fears, as well as his passion for trying to make things right in a dying galaxy. He could not look at them.

“May it please the commissioners,” General Umalaa said quietly. “I wish to remove my objection to the appointment.”

Palmer looked up, stunned. Marla smiled, and the general’s face held an expression of satisfaction. He walked over and extended his hand. Palmer took it and felt a friendly, understanding quality in its grasp.

The commission voted unanimously for promotion and Colonel Martin Palmer received his first command assignment: the evacuation of the Ahrgolian worlds, less than two light centuries from Procyx . . .

“Colonel,” a familiar voice drifted through the soft drowsiness. Palmer climbed to full wakefulness and opened his eyes. It was Cosgrove, washed, clean-shaven and looking fresher than he deserved. He smiled down at him. “How you feeling?”

“Hungry.” Palmer smiled. He moved to sit up carefully. There was no pain of any kind in his arm. He marveled. There was not the least gnaw of discomfort. He felt weak and ravenous.

“I heard about the row up front. I told you to be careful of those Followers of Zorl. They’re a weird bunch.”

“How do you mean?”

Cosgrove looked puzzled. “Well, the hijacking and all. They’re fanatics.”

“I have reason to believe that the hijacker was a *criminal* plant. Gaultor did not know him well—said he was a recent arrival from offworld.”

“But from what I heard . . .”

“Did you hear who rescued the ship?” Palmer interrupted. Cosgrove waited, shaking his head.

“Gaultor. He picked up my depolarizer and vaporized the hijacker. Does that sound like



something a fanatic would do?"

"Now that *is* weird. But you know . . . as I think about it, it fits, somehow."

Palmer eased off the bed. "How do you mean?"

"Well, back on Ahrgol, just before I passed out in the shuttle, when a lot of the natives were panicking and trying to get out—Gaultor was calm—serene. He even went around helping the injured. I remember he picked up a baby and held it. I guess its mother was dead. Anyway, I didn't see any of that arrogance he had when I first talked to him. He was," Cosgrove rummaged for the right words, "Casual? No, that's not exactly right. It was as though he were in complete control of things. Yeah, that's it. He looked like he was controlling everything. Then I passed out. Next thing I know, we're free of Ahrgol, but we've just been hijacked. Then they brought you in and I heard that the ship had been retaken. Some ride."

Palmer smiled.

"Well, sir—how do you feel?" The medic appeared, still holding his clipboard.

"Hungry. That's natural, isn't it? I haven't had a decent meal in a couple of days."

"Well, unintentional fasting *is* part of it. Most of the blame goes to the scanner. You need to get your strength back. We used a lot of fat cells in healing you so quickly. I wouldn't be surprised if you needed a larger uniform."

"How long have I been out?"

"Four hours—roughly. As a command officer, we gave you the works. You still need more sleep. By the way, you had a nightmare earlier. Have any dreams since?"

"Yes. I was back at my promotion hearing."

The medic grinned. "*Another* nightmare, eh?"

Palmer laughed. "It ended up well—better than I ever thought it could."

"Your positive attitude's a byproduct of the healing. We greased up your psyche, too. For whatever reason, your mind chose that particular experience to reflect the healing process. I read a paper on it—why the mind chooses the dreams it does under scanner healing. Sometime I'll tell you about it."

"Thanks, sounds interesting." Palmer turned to Cosgrove. "I'm so hungry I can't see straight. But I've got to check topside and see what's happening. Care to join me?"

"Eat as soon as you can, Colonel. You're better, but you're still weak. You need nourishment."

"Will do." Palmer stood up. He was a little dizzy, but steadied himself quickly. Then he headed for the control bubble with Cosgrove.

Engineering crews must have opened the blast doors and were now clustered around the damaged instrument panels in the control bubble. Adams, the emergency pilot, sat at the scorched command station. He swiveled to look at them.

"Colonel," he nodded once at Palmer, then at Cosgrove. "Lieutenant."

"What's up?"

"Not sure yet. That nasty little shaman really messed things up. We're in hyperspace, as you know. We've dropped into normal space just long enough for the computer to get its bearings, and here we are again."

"No, no, now wait a minute. You say the ship's computer took bearings after we dropped out of hyperspace, only to jump *again*? By *itself*?"

"Affirm. You see, just before the terrorist scorched our overrides, he fed a ROM card into the computer. Fool thing's protected. Man, is it protected. We've been trying to break in ever since. It's

an elegant program. I gotta hand it to the little worm. The flight plan is locked into the system. There's no way of stopping the program short of completely shutting down the ship for a reboot. That would be fatal to us outside of dry dock. Unless I can override his protections, there's no way of defeating the program. We'll go wherever he wanted us to go and there's nothing we can do about it."

"When we dropped into normal space, did you have a chance to get any *visual* bearings? Do you have any idea where we might be going?"

Adams nodded gravely. "Don't know for sure, but I'd say we were heading into unfriendly territory."

"Be more specific." Palmer said. An uneasy suspicion gnawed at his insides. It amplified his hunger, of all things. His stomach growled.

"Mhyrn, Colonel. I'd say we were headed for Mhyrn."

"Great," Cosgrove said. "Just great. That's *all* we need."

"Are you sure?"

"No," Adams folded his arms. "There *are* other star systems, but all of them are within the Hyper M tide line. No one in his right mind would station anything there. I wouldn't even venture into that space. Still, I've checked records on all of them. None have any current Fed outposts on them. There were a couple of small, scientific colonies on a system or two, but they have long since been evacuated. For all I know, Hyper M might have gotten them already. No sir. Only Mhyrn might have some sort of use for us—the ferryship, I mean."

Palmer reflected on that. There *were* the Looting Combines. These pirates might occupy abandoned Federation stations. Of late they had grown quite powerful, boasting huge fleets of warships and manpower capable of stripping entire doomed worlds of their remaining wealth in days.

Palmer thought of Gaultor again. He knew a little about the religion of Zorl, but not enough. The Mhyrnian's actions revealed a belief in the high value of human life. Gaultor demonstrated other virtues, like self restraint, courage, temperance, sensible reasoning...

"There's another point to consider," Adams continued. "The hijacker was a shaman. If *you* were going to hijack a ship filled with Zorl Followers, and *you* really hated the Federation, where would *you* go?"

Palmer nodded, though unconvinced. If Gaultor lived his religion, as Palmer believed, then the shaman's action didn't fit Adams' cold, prejudiced view of the Followers of Zorl. And then he felt guilty. Had Adams come to him even with this reasoning a few days earlier, Palmer would have accepted it as the best rationale, that the ship had been taken for purposes of religious fanaticism. Now, he suspected piracy more than motivations of faith.

"Even if we do go to Mhyrn, couldn't it still be for reasons of piracy?" Cosgrove asked. Both Palmer and Adams turned to look at him.

"What do you mean?" Adams asked.

"The Looting Combines *have* been known to plant skilled agents in primitive cultures to help them in their smuggling.

"But what good would it do to have such an agent on Ahrgol?" Adams countered. "Sure there would have been some valuables left behind before Hypermotility struck, but why wouldn't he just call his fleets to come on in?"

"Ahrgol was a Quadrant Head." Palmer said. "Even fully evacuated, the automated planetary defense network could easily dispose of even a substantial sized fleet. No, there must have be something valuable on board *this* vessel—so valuable that the agent revealed himself in his attempt

to take the ship.”

“Attempt nothing,” Adams added. “We’re going where he wants us to go even though he’s dead.”

“But what could be so valuable?” Cosgrove said quickly. “He couldn’t have had time to smuggle anything on board—not the way I took them out.”

Adams nodded slowly.

“If it were something he could carry,” Cosgrove continued. “It must be hidden onboard right now. I can’t imagine him keeping it on his person during the hijacking.”

Palmer nodded. “A good point. What say we begin a ship-wide search?”

“So what are we looking for?”

“Anything of value unaccounted for. Use hypers to look, especially for pluridium valuables that might be hard to acquire on the open market.”

Cosgrove nodded. “Yes, Colonel. What about the Ahrgolians? He might have stashed something among them, don’t you think?”

“Possibly. I’ll work with the Ahrgolians,” Palmer said evenly.

“Should I alert Security?” Adams said.

Palmer shook his head. “I don’t think that’s necessary—yet. I will speak to the head Mhyrnian. Meantime, keep trying to break the program protections and get us back control of the ship.”

Adams hesitated.

“Well,” Palmer said. “What is it?”

“Begging your pardon, sir—but I think, in view of the recent hijacking . . . I . . . I just think it would be best if Security went along. There may be other agents planted among those fanatics. Maybe they’re plotting something else to make sure the hijacking succeeds.”

Palmer considered that. The advice was sound, but it felt wrong. This *could* be an excellent opportunity to build trust with Gaultor, risks or no. He could not pass it up. Trust could only benefit everyone, and Palmer knew that trust, though easy to destroy, takes time to build. He shook his head, finally.

“I appreciate your council. I will talk to the Mhyrnian alone.”

Adams expression held steady, then he nodded and turned to his panels.

“I’ll get going on the search, Colonel,” Cosgrove said, and left quickly.

Suddenly, space appeared about them. Palmer swung to look forward. A cool, rose-colored sun shone at the center of the main view screen. Lettering of flashing red stood next to it. Mhyrn, it read. Beyond the ancient star, Procyx seared the blackness. There may have been other stars to see, but the glare of the End Star washed them out. Immediately, they vanished and hyperspace closed on the ferryship once more. Palmer turned to look at Adams again. The pilot nodded.

“It’s certain. We’re heading for Mhyrn.”

Palmer headed for the observation cabin. He didn’t know if Gaultor would be there, but it was good place to start. His stomach mumbled again. He knew he must get something to eat. He promised himself that he would, immediately after he talked to Gaultor.

He walked by sick bay.

“Colonel,” the familiar voice of the medic called to him. He turned aside.

“Colonel, the Mhyrnian shaman just asked if he could go through the morgue a minute ago. I

couldn't see any reason why not. Some of his Followers are there. I hope that was all right."

Palmer nodded. "Is he still there now?"

"Yes sir. It's at the end of the corridor straight ahead and to your right."

"Thanks," Palmer smiled and followed the medic's directions. He didn't know what rites of death the religion of Zorl had, but there would very likely be *something*. He approached carefully and waited, listening.

There was no sound. The room was dark. Palmer wondered if the medic had been mistaken. He waited at the door and then looked around the corner into the morgue. There was a subdued lighting coming from the ceiling. Palmer's gaze moved around until he found Gaultor standing near a row of draped bodies. The Mhyrnian was looking at him.

"Excuse me, Gaultor. I hope I did not interrupt you. I was told you were here."

Gaultor only stared at him, then spoke. "Come in. I was merely inspecting the dead of my people—and of yours."

Palmer walked forward. The two bodies Gaultor stood between were draped in Federation flags and tagged with the name *Jenson*. Palmer stopped to look at the forms. All the bitter hurt he had felt earlier flooded him anew. The images of his parents flashed before him vividly, then Evanna's death. Finally there was Jenson on the bridge before the hijacking. A heavy depression drowned him in its doom. Tears sprang up. With a heaving effort Palmer forced them down, but not quite. He wiped at his eyes quickly. When he looked at Gaultor he saw a hint of moisture in his eyes as well, clinging stubbornly to the lower lids. The silence was thick with shared, unspoken pain.

"Forgive me, Gaultor," Palmer said, his throat closing on him. "I've seen too much death. Are there many of your people here?"

"Too many," Gaultor nodded.

There was more silence for a while.

"I'm so very sorry. We tried to save them all. The two bodies here draped in Federation flags are father and son. They died also.

There was another silence. Palmer gathered himself. "Gaultor, I must ask a favor of you."

Gaultor waited.

"It's possible that the one who has diverted the ship may have been involved with criminals. These outlaws steal from worlds that have entered Hypermotility. He may have smuggled something on board that was of great value to him—great enough to risk his taking over the ship to collect wealth for it. If he had, he probably would have hidden it before attempting the take over. I ask for your help in searching for it."

"How may I help?"

"Could you ask your people to look among their possessions for anything that might have been slipped in among them—anything unusual. My people are searching the rest of the vessel."

"Why do you not just look among the possessions of my people yourselves? Do you fear us still?"

"No," Palmer said. "We do not wish further intrusions upon you. Whatever you choose to do, we will not invade your privacy."

Gaultor studied Palmer's face. "We *could* yet be harboring others who would take the ship—you know that."

"I do."

"Yet you do not intrude."

"We have intruded enough."

Gaultor looked down at the draped bodies of the two Jensions—father and son. “I sense that these two were good men.”

Palmer nodded. “They died preserving this ship, that we might flee to safety.”

“I will do as you wish.”

“Thank you,” Palmer said. He turned to leave. At the door, he hesitated, looking back.

“Thank you for saving my life,” he said.

Gaultor nodded once, and Palmer left.

Gaultor watched him leave, a long-denied hope stirring within him. Here was a man of great integrity—a man of strength and caring among the Infidels. The more Gaultor knew of him, the greater that impression deepened. If *The Infidel* of the prophecies was to arise from among the Federationists, none suited the description better than Palmer. But Gaultor wondered. They must yet return to Mhyrn. If they might somehow return to his home world, then he would be all but sure that the prophecy of the Holy Man and the Infidel was being fulfilled before him, and that held immeasurable significance for Gaultor. He dared not hope it.

Palmer decided to head to his quarters. He chided himself at his tears before Gaultor. Crying was a healthy catharsis, but it should always be kept private. People unfailingly assumed the worst of anyone who openly cried in public.

His stomach complained adamantly. He delayed no further and turned aside for a large meal.

The commissary was designed to soothe. FedComm had gone to great lengths to make this one place aboard its utilitarian vessel like a planetary Eden. The eating tables had a rustic look. The domed ceiling allowed for complete, environmental simulation. At present, there was a forest glade here. The trees rustled with a quiet breeze, and a stream tumbled crystal water at the extreme end. Birds trilled. Some were close and others distant. A man served the food. He wore a dark apron and causal denims. He cheerfully offered a variety of dishes from steaming pots.

The effect never ceased to amaze Palmer. Suddenly he was at home. He even felt the cool breeze that rustled the aspen, and the sunlight was true. He glanced up at the sun, too bright to gaze upon, and smelled the faint fragrance of wildflowers mingled with dead wood, leaves, and even a touch of pine.

He glanced around at the tables. There were no Ahrgolians here, just crew and staff. He saw the astrosociologist FedComm had sent—the one who had been critically injured on approach to Ahrgol and whom he had first seen asleep under the Mediscanner. She looked freshly washed and wore denim pants and a flannel shirt. She was ravenous over her food. Palmer turned and went to the food server.

“What’s good today?” Palmer asked.

“Well, we have fried chicken here, ham and beef. Potatoes, corn, Milches and bread—ice water, milk and a variety of fruit juices to drink. What’ll you have, Colonel?”

Palmer accepted chicken, potatoes, Milch, some bread and apple juice. As he carried his tray he looked around for a table.

“Martin?” a familiar voice called. Palmer looked across the tables and saw Dr. Varl seated near the stream. He nodded once and headed there. As he sat at the table, the scientist, who was largely finished with his meal, literally exploded with excitement. Palmer wanted to be polite and

give Varl his full attention, but his appetite won, and he decided to eat. He dug in with a vengeance.

"Is this a bad time?" Dr. Varl said, apparently noting Palmer's eagerness to be fed.

"If you don't mind my eating while you talk," Palmer said between chews, "I'm still listening."

"Good, good. Martin, I must tell you. I think I may've cracked what Hypermotility is."

Palmer stopped eating.

Dr. Varl smiled, nodding, "It's amazing, and so simple that I'm astonished I didn't think of it earlier. Martin, Hypermotility is a result of Procyx."

Palmer started eating again. After swallowing a mouthful of food he spoke. "Dr. Varl, it has long been suspected that Procyx and Hypermotility are linked." He took another mouthful of food. It tasted wonderful.

"Oh, I know that Martin. But now I think I have some firm data to support it—if my guess is right about what Procyx is."

Palmer waited. Dr. Varl shifted around in his chair, his eyes darting beyond Palmer's face as if he were searching for a way to express the inexpressible.

"Well, let me start. You remember the security men you threatened to send after me if I didn't pull the plug myself? Well, when they came I bribed them into loading my trans-continuum spectrograph with me. They brought it on board and I got it put in one of the science department's spare lab bubbles."

Palmer smiled. That must have taken some doing. There were no spare bubbles. They were always crammed with instruments. How Varl had managed to get one of them must have been some story. Dr. Varl continued.

"Any way, I had the transconspec pointed directly at Ahrgol when it went, and what do you think I saw?" His voice went to a whisper. "Pluridium emission lines! True, they were well down into the megatronic range, but—pluridium, Martin—*pluridium!*"

"Pluridium?" Palmer echoed, trying not to appear too stupid.

"Yes, yes! It's amazing. It puts a whole new light on things. You see, Martin, the only place where pluridium can be created is in hyperspace—right?"

Palmer nodded between swallows of apple juice.

"Pluridium is a synthetic metal—it doesn't occur in nature . . ."

"Except on Mhyrn," Palmer interrupted.

"Yes, of course—on Mhyrn. But Mhyrn is the only place we know of in the galaxy where pluridium can be found in nature. The evidence points to a link between Mhyrn and Procyx—a literal connection."

"I . . ."

"It suggests that Procyx has existed before—perhaps long ago. If so, Mhyrnians must have seen it back then. That is why it exists in their mythology. It also suggests that Procyx is a repeater."

"A repeater. Great! You mean we can expect it to happen again some time in the future—providing we survive?"

"Yes. But there's a bright side, too—don't you see? If it existed once before, and the universe survived, doesn't that suggest that we might survive this occurrence too?"

"Hmm. Yes. I suppose it could. So when does it stop?"

Varl shook his head. "Who can say?" He looked down at his empty plate. He picked up his fork and fussed with a few crumbs of Milch. "Let's return to the data I garnished. The pluridium I saw synthesized by the destruction of Ahrgol suggests the following: First, that hyperspace affected

the destruction of that planet.”

“Hyperspace?”

“Pluridium only occurs in hyperspace. Maybe Ahrgol and all the worlds that die to Hypermotility have merely been exposed directly to hyperspace.”

“Interesting idea.”

“Second, that the destruction of the Ahrgol system was caused by a radiating field of some sort, originating at Procyx.”

“What is this field like?” Palmer asked, noticing the flavor of his food less and less. “It can’t be spherical, since there are worlds both closer to, and farther from Procyx, that still stand.” He took a bite of Milch, savoring its tangy sweetness.

“The field has to be spherical. But its effects may be too complex to see any pattern.”

“What about Gelding’s model?”

“Yes. The computer can predict destructions to a high percentage. But, as I understand it, it uses statistical data. There’s been nothing to go on—until now.

“The fact remains that Ahrgol, in its death, created pluridium. Now, here is what I think. My idea about Procyx is that it is an inter-dimensional rift—a tear in the fabric of space where hyperspace itself may be spilling out into our universe.”

“Hyperspace,” Palmer said, trying to remember any scientific data he might have heard that could support that idea. “Dr. Varl, I can’t remember reading or hearing anything about pluridium emissions from other studies on Hypermotile matter.”

“Neither could I, so I checked and rechecked not only my data, but all the scientific literature on Hypermotility. No one has seen pluridium emissions. No one.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as odd?” Palmer finished. He swallowed the last of the apple juice and then noticed that he had eaten the Milches without really enjoying them. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, Palmer saw the astrosociologist leave the commissary. He took casual notice of how attractive she was.

“Of course it strikes me as odd. But maybe the effect of Procyx is just now becoming strong enough to render measurable perturbations in matter and energy—just now, after hundreds of years and after destroying thousands of star systems.

“Let me put it this way. Procyx is causing the matter around it to behave as if it were in hyperspace. Somehow, Procyx itself might be the hyperspacial dimension pushing into our universe. That *could* explain why stars die before their time. In hyperspace, time becomes variable.”

“That reminds me of another thing I found on Ahrgol before it blew. You remember how I told you that all kinds of temporal distortions were going on?”

Palmer nodded.

“Variable time,” Dr. Varl’s eyes flashed in excitement. “That, plus the tremendous forces of hyperspace, *could* cause stars to nova, worlds to explode—all kinds of unnatural occurrences.”

Palmer considered this. “If Procyx were hyperspace, then why is it that *we* aren’t falling apart right now? We’re in hyperspace.”

“Ah, yes. But we have a *graviton* field surrounding us. Nothing of the ship actually comes in contact with hyperspace. The ship creates a small, completely enclosed bubble that rides the flows and currents, much like an air bubble does in the ocean. Procyx may be an opening, like a leak in a dike through which more and more water is flowing. The trouble is, who is going to plug it? Who has a thumb big enough to stop up the hole between universes?”

Palmer made a face. “Thumbs and dikes?” At last Dr. Varl, seeing his confusion, told him the

story about the boy who saved his village by putting his thumb in the leaking dike until help could be found to patch up the hole.

"Martin, you must get me back to a Federation base immediately. I don't know, but this may be the definition to the Procyx problem. Once we define a problem, then the solution is just around the corner. How soon can you get me to a base where I can get a fast ship to Collins University? I don't think any other scientists know about Procyx and pluridium. They certainly don't know that pluridium can be found in areas of Hypermotility. How soon, Martin?"

Palmer shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe never."

"What? I need to do this right away. The refugees must wait . . ."

"You don't understand. I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know what's happened?"

Dr. Varl shook his head.

"We've been hijacked by an Ahrgholian shaman—one of the refugees."

"So where are we going? Is he in control now? I must try to reason with him. This is bigger than any quarrels we might have with his beliefs—he must see that . . ."

"He's dead."

"Oh. Well . . . then don't you have control of the ship?"

"No. He fed a burned course into the ship's computer then made it impossible for us to override the course he set."

"Martin," he whispered. "What can we do? Where are we headed?"

"Well, the Mhyrn system. It's too early to tell which planet just yet."

Dr. Varl fell silent, his bushy eyebrows tangling together.

"Colonel," Palmer felt Cosgrove tranz. "I have completed an exhaustive search of the ship. I've used every scanning device and homer we've got. Nothing."

"Colonel," Adams cut in. "No luck in breaking in. I'm afraid our course is set."

"Thanks," Palmer replied by biotranz. "Cogs, call off the search, unless you can think of an unusual kind of valuable a terrorist might have. Adams, I appreciate your efforts. Keep trying to break in."

"I don't know what else to try . . ."

"Get creative!" Palmer barked. "Sorry. If you get any ideas . . ."

"Will do, sir."

"Meanwhile, I'll go talk to Gaultor."

"Martin?"

"Oh, sorry Mael. I was just tranzing. Look, I've got to go below."

"Of course. Anything I can I do?"

"The best thing you can do is to compile your findings. Dump everything into hard memory and prepare a capsule. I'll order a buoy readied with a hypertranz beacon. At least we can Jettison when we drop out of hyperspace again."

"Yes, yes, yes. I'll get going on it immediately." He jumped up and practically ran from the commissary, leaving his tray behind. Palmer gathered up Dr. Varl's plates and stacked them on his tray. He had deliberately avoided telling Varl about the grave danger they faced going to Mhyrn. Best save that till *after* the buoy had been safely jettisoned.

The ship shuddered. Palmer guessed they must have just dropped out of hyperspace. He shook his head. They were probably well within the Mhyrn star system now, and there would not be



time to jettison the buoy. Still, it would be best not to tell Dr. Varl. The minutes ahead would be nerve racking.

"Colonel," Adams tranzed. "We're on approach to Mhyrn itself. We should reach sub-orbit in less than an hour."

"I'm on my way to talk to Gaultor right now." He walked out of the glade and down the corridor toward the observation cabin. Gaultor was not there. He tranzed the placement officer and discovered which stateroom the Mhyrnian had been assigned and went there.

Gaultor knelt within, head bowed and arms poised over his head. Beyond him was a wide view port that spilled the brilliant spectral blue of Procyx throughout the cabin. Palmer stood in silence, not wishing to disturb the shaman's reverence. After perhaps a minute's time, Gaultor bowed forward, then straightened. He started, apparently just aware of Palmer's presence, and climbed to his feet. Slowly, he turned to face him.

"I did not wish to disturb you, or intrude," Palmer said, his voice gnarled by an unwanted, nervous swallow. "I will leave if you wish to continue."

"That will not be necessary. How may I help you?"

"I was wondering if you had spoken to your people about any hidden . . . items?"

"I have. They have found nothing. I am sorry."

Palmer sighed. Nothing. What could the hijacker have been trying to smuggle? Maybe he *had* had it on his person. Or maybe Gaultor was lying. Palmer tried to put that thought out of his mind. It threatened to ruin the mutual trust he was trying to establish.

"You are troubled, Federation Colonel. Why? The ship is yours again, is it not?"

Palmer shook his head. "No."

Gaultor took a step forward. "But I thought . . ."

"Our course is fixed. We are going to wherever your . . . the shaman planned to meet his people, whoever they may be. That is why I needed to know what he might have smuggled on board that would have been of value."

"I see. Do you know where are we going?"

"Yes." Palmer took a deep breath. "Mhyrn."

Gaultor swung to look out the view port, but only Procyx still hung against the black.

Palmer continued. "I must now ask for yet another favor. I know the people of Mhyrn hate the Federation, and with good cause. My people have lied many times. Your brothers have no reason to believe anything we may say now—that this is a ship in trouble. They may decide to shoot us down in any event." Palmer could not look at Gaultor. It was too much. He dreaded seeing the gloat that might be there. He knew Gaultor was staring at him.

No. He must look up.

But Gaultor stood with his back to him, looking out as a few dim stars drifted slowly to port. Procyx was gone. The ferryship must have turned so that the view port looked back toward the galaxy, where stars still glittered. Palmer waited, but Gaultor kept his back to him.

"I am hoping," he continued, "That I may tell the people of your world that you and your Followers are on board this vessel. They *might* allow us to land safely. If they do, then I will have fulfilled my responsibilities in delivering your people to safety."

He steeled himself for what he was now about to say.

"And then, we will submit ourselves to the will of your people. I thought I should tell you. Will you, for the sake of your Followers, permit us to broadcast a visual of yourself to the surface?"

Gaultor turned to look at Palmer. The large Mhyrnian stood in silhouette. Beyond and below

the ship, an emerald and white orb began swelling in the starless void. Procyx poured its vivid blue light into the cabin once more, blazing above the approaching planet. It was Mhyrn.

Gaultor worked at the tightness in his throat, finally speaking. "I will speak to them as you wish." His voice trembled. "Please give me a moment."

Palmer turned to leave. But something made him stop. He hesitated, and then looked back into Gaultor's cabin again.

The looming shaman had turned to gaze out the view port again—at the growing horizon of Mhyrn.

"*Gisdrovi tohn Mhyrn,*" Gaultor said. The control of his voice trembled away into oblivion. He fell to his knees and wept.

Palmer withdrew in silence.

"How long have you known the comm systems were out?" Palmer's stomach churned in that awful gnawing of disaster he had felt back when Hypermotility had first struck Ahrgol. He struggled hard to keep the expression on his face neutral.

"Just now, when I tried firing her up," Adams replied. His eyes were tired, his face pale. "She's absolutely dead, along with everything else in this cursed ship!"

"Can you go to battle stations?"

"Already have—quietly. I don't want to alert the Ahrgolians just yet. That might inspire them to rebel or something."

Palmer nodded. "Does the dead comm system have anything to do with the program the hijacker put in?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. I can't get the mainframe to rouse the comm computer. The whole thing's crashed beyond diagnostics. There's just nothing."



Ferryship at Mhyrn - click image for a larger view

"No sense in getting Gaultor, then," Palmer sighed. A heavy gloom descended on him. Now, it seemed, they would die at the hands of the very people they had struggled to save—the Followers of Zorl, no matter what their planet of birth.

The ferryship fell sub-orbital, decelerating carefully, smoothly—as if piloted by an experienced human rather than a computer program. Palmer gazed at the sweeping panorama afforded him within the control bubble. Mhyrn was now so close

that its horizon was nearly a straight line.

The sun of Mhyrn hung just above the limb off to port. It was not clear whether this was an evening or morning sun, but it blazed a rich rose above broken lavender and cream-edged clouds. The edge of twilight lay directly ahead. Beyond the sun's reach, the surface of the planet was obscured in black, or perhaps midnight green. Palmer could not be sure.

They dropped through multiple layers of clouds. The sun rested on the horizon. Off to starboard, a distant, cone-shaped edifice reached well into the clouds. Its mirror-polished surface glinted with lavender highlights. Hundreds of *Colossus* Class battleships arrayed in ring formations all about it stacked well into the stratosphere – potent sentinels.

Alarms sounded from all over the control bubble. Crew sat alert at sophisticated defense consoles that flashed to life. Blinking readouts appeared next to a line of dark specks approaching the ferryship from port.

"Nine o'clock—twenty KRAS class fighters approaching on intercept," someone tranzed. "Depolarizers locked and tracking."

"Shields at 'C,'" a woman tranzed.

"Hold fire," Palmer tranzed generally.

The squadron of sleek, chromium-gold fighters shrieked past the ferryship so close that their roar could be heard through the walls of the control bubble.

"Hold your fire." Palmer tranzed again.

Abruptly, the ferryship turned into the sun and began descending. Night claimed them quickly as the ship lost altitude in its blind course.

All eyes followed the projected trajectories of the fighters, waiting tensely to see indications of a return. The ships merely dispersed into the distant swarms of vessels that clustered about the strange, dwindling edifice.

Night fell as the ferryship continued its descent toward a forested landscape lost in darkness, alone and untroubled. There was an uncertain easing of tension in the control bubble. Deep scanners showed no pursuit. Palmer stood, shaking his head in astonishment.

## CHAPTER SIX

# The City

Unchallenged, the ferryship glided at treetop level above Mhyrn's night-soaked terrain. No lights from cities shone anywhere for hundreds of kilometers. The great cone edifice had disappeared behind intervening mountains while a colossal peak appeared to the north, distant, lost in mists and high clouds. Straight ahead, a distant bubble structure blistered up from the deep forest. The moon at zenith dimly lit its clouded, heat-ruddied surface, now and again mirroring reflections from polished, smooth patches.

"What's that dome?" someone tranzed. "Is that a city inside there? It looks like buildings—but inside a dome? The people who built that must have been either rich or paranoid."

Palmer smiled without humor. "I think they were both. It's what's left of the Federation City, RoseStar. It's deserted."

Abruptly, the ferryship slowed to a hover. A rasping hum grated dangerously from the engines. Landing lights sprang on, heralding final approach mode. The ship eased into a clearing. The mammoth forest loomed up all around the vessel, its exotic trees boasting emeralds, ambers and burgundy leafings. Each variety was lovely with its own unique symmetry.

Touch down. An instant later, what was left of the nav panel imploded, discharging a foul-smelling smoke. Simultaneously, the P-Q-I engines shut down completely. The last commands of the hijacker's program must have been to short out what remained of the navigation systems, then power down the engines. Either event alone would effectively cripple the vessel for hours, if not days. Adams swore.

Palmer looked back at him. The pilot's smile was livid. "I know, Colonel—" then he caught himself. "Sir. I'll get working on it right away."

"Got any spare nav consoles on board?" Palmer asked, climbing down from the command chairs. Adams shook his head 'no,' then receiving a tranz, looked away while he listened.

"Engineering just called up," he reported at last. "That odd hum we heard on landing? It was the EQ generator again. They think it's fused royally this time. They request permission to check it out since the engines are shut down anyway."

Palmer's mind went in several directions at once. "I'm going to issue ship-wides," Palmer answered Adams. He then opened up the all vessel circuits and started giving orders.

"Engineering, go ahead and look at the engines. Van Goff, set up a watch perimeter outside the ship. May as well start sending a distress callout on sensors. I don't know what Fed Comm can do for us, but we can at least let them know where we are.

"We'll need a shuttle cracked and powered up so we can fly all non-essential personnel well out of blast range. Once away from the ship, set up trimester survival camps, decentralized and cloaked with *infrared liars* on the tents. I'll need hard copies of status reports, timetables and estimates from all departments in my quarters within half an hour. If you can't be ready by then, then A.S.A.P. Any questions?"

"I have a comment," someone tranzed. "I'm Dorich, from engineering. We saw a domed city on approach. That *is* a Federation city, isn't it?"

"I think so," someone else tranzed.

"Colonel," Dorich continued. "Isn't it possible there may be plug-ins and ship parts left in

storage over there? It's standard procedure to keep all extras under security lock when there's an evacuation, isn't it?"

Palmer's heart quickened at the idea. "Dorich, you're a genius. Yes, it is procedure. We'll check it out." He and Adams exchanged the first genuine smiles they had felt in hours. Palmer started out of the control bubble, still issuing commands by tranz.

"Crack some hoversleds and trailers. Engineering, get me a hard list of what you need. I'll have to go along in person to gather the supplies. If the security locks are still operable, I'm the only one here with high enough clearance to free them. Adams, open up the deep scanners. I don't want us to be caught off guard."

"Yes, Colonel," Adams replied, and Palmer hurried to his quarters.

The shuttle carrying the Ahrgolians lifted just as Palmer emerged from the ferryship. It disappeared beyond the high horizon of trees to the south. Palmer had tried twice to get there before the shuttle left, but matters had prevented it. He wished he had been able to say goodbye to Gaultor. The Mhyrnian was a good man—an enviable ambassador, both of his people and of his beliefs. What better thing could be said of anyone than that? Palmer watched the departure until the whining of the shuttle was swallowed by the sounds of night. Sighing, he turned his attention elsewhere.

The P-Q-I engines were bathed in the rose light of portastrobes. About twenty people on hovers had stripped the engine shells to the core, revealing multiple scorched and even melted sections. It looked awful, perhaps worse even than Engineering had surmised.

"Colonel," a woman's voice turned Palmer. A young lieutenant came out of the ship toward him. She handed him some papers in a folder. "Here are the items we need. I don't know if you'll be able to bring them all back in one trip, even with three hoversleds and trailers."

Palmer looked at the list that took two pages of narrow typing. "Good grief, how long will it take to install all this, providing we can supply it?"

"I was told to report that installation could take four to six hours. After that we'll still need a couple of hours minimum to fire the P-Q-I."

"Any idea how long we have until daybreak?"

"We guess about seven and a half hours, sir. The sooner we get those modules and plug-ins the sooner we can begin. We might even be out of here before daybreak."

"I admire your optimism." It always took longer.

"Will that be all, sir?"

Palmer nodded. The lieutenant left Palmer standing at the edge of the night, gazing up at the stars. This wasn't over yet. He felt sure of that. Whoever the hijacker worked for might come after them at any time. Even if he had worked alone there could still be an innocent, routine investigation by the natives. That would probably occur during daylight. No, eventually, someone would come. If the Ferryship could be out of here by dawn, they might just avoid an incident. The odds were assuredly against them.

"Still, it's worth a try," he muttered and headed toward the hoversleds and trailers, then tranzed a message to Cosgrove.

"Cogs, I want you to join me at the hoversleds. We'll need an extra pilot who can handle the third sled, hopefully one who has some knowledge of Mhyrnes. What about that astrosociologist?"

"Her? Don't know, Colonel. Why would you think she is?"

"Archaeology is a required minor for astrosociology. Hoversleds are used a lot in field

research. I'd bet she's been on some digs."

"Got it. I'll ask her."

"Thanks," Palmer trazed back. "I sort of wish Gaultor hadn't gone with his followers. If the Mhyrnians do come looking, I think we could trust him to help us—he being one of their shamans. It would certainly go better for us than if we were discovered alone."

Palmer reached the sleds and began checking them over. In flight, they were absolutely silent, designed for low altitude stealth. Shaped like spades when seen from above, their mirror finish glistened beneath the intense, pink light of the portastrobes.

Each sled was an open-air, high tech recon vehicle, complete with pilot and passenger seat recessed in the upper surface of the craft. Each had windscreen generators, holographic instrumentation, full-spectrum scanners, and tranz boosters, so that clear communication could be maintained with the ferryship. The range of a biotranz was about five kilometers. The boosters would be essential if they were to keep in touch with the ferryship from the heart of the deserted Federation City.

Palmer moved on to the trailers. The bullet-shaped carts were mounted on grav generators that could sync-lock to the sleds. Together, they could move a fair amount of cargo over considerable distances.

"Give us a month's worth standard survival gear," Palmer trazed the coordination officer. "I want chameleon robes, a full compliment of ordinance—the works, just in case something happens. Make sure we have transpectral helmets with weapon sync capability."

"Aye, Colonel. I've relayed your message to Captain Adams so he knows. It will be ten, maybe fifteen minutes before we'll be ready for you to leave."

"Fine. Thank you."

Palmer verified that the sleds were fully charged, then turned back toward the ferryship. He hesitated. On the far side of the perimeter he thought he saw Gaultor, gazing out into the night

"Did Gaultor leave with the Ahrgolians?" Palmer trazed Adams.

There was a pause. "I thought he had, Colonel. Let me check."

"Never mind. I'll find out myself." Palmer left the sleds. The tall figure wore a chameleon robe. As Palmer approached, Van Goff and one of the guards joined him.

"What's up, Colonel? Trouble?"

Palmer shook his head. "I don't think so. I'm just surprised to see the Mhyrnian still with us. Is the shuttle that took the Ahrgolians making two trips?"

"No, sir. Gaultor insisted on staying."

Palmer reached him. The proud Mhyrnian turned to him. His face was dark in the shadow. Beyond, the moon hung pale among clouds that gathered upon the crest of the gigantic peak to the north.

"Gaultor—are you all right? Why didn't you go with your people?"

Gaultor's deep voice flowed through the darkness. "My people will be fine. They have accepted the fact that I cannot be with them."

Palmer hesitated. Something wasn't right here.

"You know that you're in great danger as long as you remain near our ship."

Silence. Did Gaultor nod understanding?

"Why?" Palmer asked.

"I told you that I owe you our lives—that as long as you are in danger, I will do all in my power to aid you. Until you are safe among your people, my promise remains."

Palmer trazed Van Goff and the guard to withdraw. Silently, they moved away into the

darkness.

Funny. It seemed Gaultor was not telling him everything. It was something in the way he spoke. Or perhaps it was just because he could not see the shaman's face.

From the east, a brilliant blue light flooded the terrain, catching the chiseled features of Gaultor's face in profile. Procyx rose in coherent splendor above the horizon. Its spectral brilliance was glorious. Palmer regarded it for long moments. He looked back at Gaultor and saw him gazing at the terrible star as well. The moisture in the Mhyrnian's eyes glistened blue reflections.

"That is also why I stay," he said quietly, then looked at Palmer again. "Now, how may I be of assistance?"

"You know anything about RoseStar?"

Gaultor's voice took on a precise, controlled quality. "Yes. It is the city of my father."

Palmer wondered at that. RoseStar was the Federation capitol of Mhyrn. Why would any of the Mhyrnians choose to live there? He fought the urge to ask Gaultor about it.

"So you know the city personally?"

"I do. You wish to go there?"

"Yes, Gaultor." Palmer thrilled at the prospect of being able to enter the city with a guide who could take them directly to the warehouses. "It is our only hope of escaping. My people probably left supplies there, things we can use to fix the ship. If we can get to them . . ."

"Then you will leave my world?" Gaultor's voice sounded odd. Palmer could still not read his face well, but his voice sounded fringed with urgency.

"Yes. The sooner we can get those supplies, the sooner we can be off your world. I am sure that would please your people—to be rid of us. I do not say that with anger. I again recall our past injustices."

"Yes." Gaultor looked down for a moment. "I see."

The bustle of loading drew Palmer's attention. He glanced back to find Cosgrove and the astrosociologist standing among the sleds. The hologram readouts hovered near the fronts of the little vessels. That meant they were ready to fly. Cosgrove tranzed as much and Palmer looked back at the Mhyrnian.

"Gaultor?"

"Of course, I will go with you."

"Thank you. We're ready to leave now."

Gaultor nodded once, and went to the hoversleds.

"If you don't wish to go, Gaultor . . ."

"I will go," he cut Palmer off. "Zorl shall provide a way for his will to come to pass, unless I have mistaken the signs. In any event, I must help you."

Palmer stared at the Mhyrnian, totally confused. What in the world could Gaultor be talking about?

"Gaultor, what's wrong? Is something . . ."

"We're ready to fly." It was Cosgrove. He wore a backpack, chameleon robes and a visored, transpectral helmet. He carried an extra set and handed it to Palmer. He took the items and automatically put them on. As he fastened the helmet's chin strap, he looked back at Cosgrove.

"Colonel," Cosgrove gestured to the astrosociologist. "This is Lenore Aramus."

The woman's beauty distracted Palmer for the moment, and he forgot Gaultor's puzzling behavior. He extended his hand and felt her firm grasp. Cosgrove went on. "She's consented to accompany us to RoseStar and *is* rated to pilot a hoversled."

"I appreciate your help," Palmer said. "Fortunately, Gaultor has also agreed to accompany us. He knows RoseStar. It's the city he grew up in."

Lenore looked at Gaultor and bowed her head slightly. "*Mythros amogh of Zorlesque, karl Gaultor.*"

Gaultor smiled, and bowed in reply. His voice was kind and warmer than Palmer had ever heard it. "*Mythrosol torl kon Zorlesqual. Tohn quann tul fesk en geebule fedd, Aramus.*"

Lenore smiled an infectious grin. "I agree. We will speak in the language we all understand."

"So, let's head out," Palmer said, donning his chameleon robe. Lenore put on the helmet Cosgrove had just handed her. She headed for one of the sleds while Cosgrove went for the second. Gaultor hesitated.

"Care to join me?" Palmer said. Without a word, Gaultor climbed into the passenger side of the sled nearest them. Palmer followed, climbing into the pilot's seat. He took a single earcom and handed it to Gaultor, who took it without a word and put it to his ear. It stayed as if by magnetism, blocking only half the ear canal. Satisfied, Palmer tranzed the vessel to full life.

Hovering readouts glowed in the air before him. They brightened to full, colorful intensity. Palmer rearranged their configuration, putting the long-range scanner cube straight overhead. At present, it stood empty. Good, Palmer thought. There were no vessels anywhere within a cube measuring 200 kilometers on each side of the ferryship. He looked at Gaultor who studied the holographic displays in something akin to wonder.

"I'm set to lift," Cosgrove tranzed. Palmer looked over at Lenore. "I'm ready," she commed. Each of the sleds was linked by auto tracking maser, effectively sealing their ship-to-ship communications from any type of broadcast eavesdropping. On the other hand, the sled-mounted tranz boosters *were* broadcast devices, but utilized encryption. Besides, they were virtually undetectable.

Palmer nodded back to Lenore. Only military personnel had biotranz units. He would have to remember to link his tranz to spoken word so that she and Gaultor could overhear whatever he tranzed to Cosgrove. It still left him the option of tranzing privately should the need arise. Gaultor tapped his ear and nodded, gesturing to Palmer that his earcom was tied in as well.

Palmer lifted the sled. It rose, slowly at first and then with increasing speed. Gaultor grasped at the sides, holding on tightly as he peered over the edge. Beneath them, the rose-lit ferryship fell quickly behind.

Palmer glanced at the long-range cube overhead. It was still empty. To test its registration, he shifted scale and perspective to include the position of the ferryship. A tiny, green holographic model appeared at the exact center of the cube. Satisfied, he shifted the orientation back to its original setting. It stood empty again.

The terrain display showed elevation mappings of land structures ahead. The bubble graphic representing RoseStar blistered among them at the base of the low mountain ranges off to the west. He instructed the sled's computer to plot a course for the city. Instantly—smoothly, the vessel began a forward thrust.

Palmer darkened the hologram. They all but disappeared, and he and Gaultor found themselves gliding dark across the fullness of the open night. Silence surrounded them. Only the moon and Procyx shone in the heavens, flooding the landscape below in a haunting blend of color and dark shadings.

Palmer looked over his shoulder. He barely saw the shapes of the other sleds some distance behind, tracking the course his computer had chosen to the tubeway.

The ruddy blister of the ruined city crept gradually closer. Palmer discovered glinting patches



among its otherwise clouded and scorched surface. They attested to an earlier time when the entire bubble must have glistened proudly beneath the stars. Palmer wondered how it might have looked in the nights of its glory: the crystalline bubble glinting beneath the moonlight; a rich spray of city lights from within twinkling through the wavering night air; flashing points of light moving about its exterior like sliding fireflies.

Now, the ruddiness of RoseStar echoed a chill of haunting death. The blinded cloudiness of its bubble bore witness of awful forces leveled against it. They must have been awful, for tempered Glassteel could withstand temperatures beyond that of fusion. Not even a concerted nuclear attack should have been able to choke and cloud the Glassteel bubble.

How could a technologically primitive culture have breached tempered Glassteel? How *had* the city been overthrown?

He glanced at Gaultor, expecting him to be gazing at the city as well. Instead, the Mhyrnian was looking over his right shoulder toward the gigantic mountain that dominated the northern horizon.

“What is it, Gaultor? Is anything wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” his voice was distant and self-consumed. “I gaze at Markeeome, the Fortress of Light—the roof of the Sleeping One’s tomb. It was from there that Ambylor, the Great Guardian of the Most High Noblemen, gazed upon Procyx in death.”

Palmer gazed back at the mountain. Amid its spectacle of form and balance he thought he saw a glow. A silver light shone from beneath enshrouding thunderheads. It illuminated the clouds as if from within—a cross between some constant lightning and a strange, silver fire.

“Is it a volcano?” He asked casually, and Gaultor swung suddenly around to gaze at him. The Mhyrnian’s face was in complete shadow and that dark silhouette must have stared at him. Gaultor’s reply almost trembled, as if he struggled beneath some barely controlled excitement.

“Why do you ask?”

Palmer found himself suddenly and inexplicably flustered—unable to answer immediately. There was something new within him; something quiet—completely real. It was a part of him and at the same time separate. It *whispered* to him that his answer to this seemingly casual question was vitally important.

The traditions of his family, the Stillmanns – the great forgers of intercultural unification – openly recognized intuition as a force in the physics of biological behavior. Unfortunately, the reality of that force could not be proven. One could not consciously wish intuition into existence. It occurred randomly and followed inconsistent rules. This made it next to impossible to study.

The failure to devise a methodology might have killed serious investigation into the Stillmann Factor had it not been for success in studying similar, incredible phenomena linked to that strain of humanity called the *Mestrates*.

Mestrate talents included things like telepathy, telekinesis, and healing the sick, but there were many more. The interactions between a Mestrate and the universe *could* be measured. Repeatable experiments had been readily performed.

The reality of the Mestrate symbiosis with the continuum had further provided conclusive evidence that the mind and even life itself was more than the ordered, self-perpetuating exchange of energies. The nature of that *more* had yet to be understood, and it remained to be seen what powers the Mestrates might ultimately control, or unleash.

As for Stillmann intuition, Palmer had twice before experienced that same forceful suggestion he had now. Twice before those flashes of insight had revealed, beyond explanation, a glimpse of

order in a universe plagued by irreversible chaos.

The silver fires that only he and Gaultor could see seemed more like a Mestrate event. Here was intuition *and* epiphany, and it made Palmer wonder. Might he also be a descendant of Varn Mestre, legendary *father* of the Mestrates? He knew of his Stillmann ancestry but had never seen evidence of Mestrate gifts in himself—nothing like those Jenson had described of his wife and son. Still, he wondered.

He concluded to follow his intuition and tell Gaultor directly and without reservation everything he saw at the pinnacle of the mountain.

“Well, it’s the light, there at its peak—beneath the clouds. I assume it must be volcanic activity. You do see it?”

“Yes,” Gaultor replied without turning to look at the mountain again. “I see it. It is the power of the Creator manifested from within the Fortress.”

Palmer doubted the wisdom of his decision to answer Gaultor so truthfully. He respected the Mhyrnian’s beliefs, but he did not share them, and his supposedly seeing the *power of God* upon the top of the mountain was a little farther in discussing the religion of Zorl with one of its shamans than he would have chosen to go. He almost said something to that effect, but changed his mind. What would such a comment accomplish? He looked back at the summit of Markeeome.

The silver light erupted in rich brilliance. It was only then that Palmer noticed that for all its intensity, the flaring illumination shed nothing upon the ships or the terrain. The light flared with sun-challenging radiance, bright enough to light the whole sky. Yet, as Palmer looked quickly elsewhere, he found only darkness, disturbed by the comparatively dim casts of Procyx and Mhyrn’s moon upon the face of the land beneath. It was only when he turned to look at the Mhyrnian that Palmer saw the brilliance of Markeeome’s glory shining on Gaultor’s face and robes. It seemed the light of Markeeome cast brilliantly upon Palmer, and that the light reflected from him back onto Gaultor.

The Mhyrnian squinted against it, and said quietly, “You see.”

An alarm began chiming within Palmer’s biotranz. Directly overhead, the long range-scanning cube brightened while the silver light on Gaultor’s face disappeared. Puzzled, Palmer glanced at Markeeome just long enough to verify that its light had also vanished. He then looked back up at the cube. The urgency of the alarm pushed the mystery of Markeeome’s mystery far into the back of his mind, for the alarm was a sure signal that the ferryship was under scrutiny. Sure enough, there, near one edge of the cube, flashed a cluster of red blips.

“Colonel,” Adams tranzed from the ferryship. “We’ve just picked up some vessels at the two hundred kilometer edge. You getting a display?”

“Affirmative,” Palmer tranzed back. “Any idea what they are?”

As if in response, the blips zoomed to fill the cube, assuming three-dimensional shapes that Palmer recognized. Printing appeared beneath them.

“Three battleships and a fifty fighters—KRAS class.”

“Great.” Palmer tranzed almost angrily. It seemed that nothing could go right for them.

“Well, I guess we all knew it was coming. What are they doing? Anything?”

“Nothing, yet—outside of scanning us. They’re just hovering there.”

“Could they be responding to our distress calls on sensor?”

“We use standard Fed encryption. Probably sounds like garbage to them. They might just be curious at our weird sensor signals.”

“Anything from Fed Comm on sensors?”

"Not a peep. Maybe Fed Comm's holding back. This *is* enemy space. They may not want to tip their hand that we use sensors for signaling sometimes. Can't imagine they're not trying to think of something to help us. We're still sending."

"Any progress on getting some sort of communications system working?"

"We need what's on the list you have."

"I'm with you." Palmer set the computer to leave them alone unless the unidentified ships moved closer. A moment later the cube disappeared. He opened up the tranz loop to include Lenore and Gaultor once more.

"What is it?" Gaultor asked, looking down from where the cube had been and over at Palmer.

"Some ships are watching us," Palmer spoke evenly, suppressing the uneasiness that gnawed at his insides. "So far, there is no need to be concerned. We are trying to establish contact with them, but our comm board was destroyed, so it will be difficult. We do believe we have a solution."

Below them, the clouded, dusty blister of RoseStar swelled ominous and massive. "Colonel," Cosgrove commed over his final words, "I've been studying the layout of the city and probing the surrounding territory. At about two o'clock low is a partially collapsed access tunnel. It's about half a kilometer from the outer bubble wall. It looks just right for us. There's a surface vent hidden among a heavy growth of those platform trees."

"They're called table trees," Lenore interjected by radio. Cosgrove was apparently waiting for her to say more, for when she didn't, he asked permission to slave all the ships to his. "Should we land?"

Palmer agreed, turning control to Cosgrove. In perfect accord, the three hoversleds curved and pitched away from the huge, dark bubble of RoseStar and descended carefully through the tangled patch of table trees.

Infrared landing strobes fired up a few meters from the ground. They bathed the terrain in an eerie, green light, as viewed through the transpectral visor Palmer had tranzed into position. He quickly surveyed the area and caught glances of fleeting movement in the deep, surrounding forest. Sets of blazing, green eyes turned to gaze upon them. The warmth of life made the creatures shine and glow through the visors. Waves of curling heat drifted upward as if the animals' bodies smoldered. Some paused in indecision and then fled deep into the consuming trees and sheltering foliage. Palmer could see only a few high, clinging tree dwellers. Apparently they felt safe from intrusion, for they lingered to study the landing party with unabashed curiosity. Palmer tried to determine whether they might be planning attack or were merely watching. When there was no apparent stalking movement, he shut down the hoversled.

"Colonel," Cosgrove tranzed him. Palmer turned to see his glowing form climbing off the hoversled and moving to one of the bullet-shaped trailers. "Switch to UV and look east." Palmer tranzed his helmet's visor to ultraviolet and saw one of the city's automated lock beacons flashing brilliantly among several trees. He tranzed his helmet's processor to store the beacon's position and display it in infrared, then changed back.

"Colonel," Lenore Aramus commed. "I can't see anything. Are you on IR?"

"Sorry," Cosgrove answered before Palmer had a chance. "Yes. Pull your visor down. Your helmet's processor will project a virtual keyboard in the air in front of you. Just type IR on it and the helmet will shift the filtering for you."

She pulled down her visor and positioned her hands as if over a keyboard floating in the air before her. After a moment, she made a typing gesture, then looked around. Her smile was green and wavering under infrared, but confident.

"Should we break out the gravdollies?" Cosgrove tranzed, turning to help Lenore down from the sled.

"There should be some in the city stores," Palmer tranzed back. "Let's not encumber our trip in. Guiding the sleds through the conduits will only slow us down."

"Colonel," Gaultor said quietly. "I assume something in your helmets allows you to see in the dark. I have only the hearing device you gave me. I will need your help."

The deep forest all but blocked any of the light from the moon or Procyx from illuminating much around them. The Mhyrnian groped about in the darkness.

"Sorry, Gaultor. We cannot have any light until we enter the conduit leading into the city." He walked to the far side of the sled and took Gaultor's hand. "We're very close. I'll guide you. Cogs, break out the portastobes."

"Right, Colonel."

Palmer saw Lenore watching him as he guided the towering shaman over the edge of the sled and carefully down to the ground.

"Gaultor," she said walking over to him. "*Tilltron je broockl at rew tove marsho.*"

Palmer looked over at her. "I thought we were going to speak in Interworld?"

"Sorry, Colonel. I just felt it would be quicker to tell him this in Mhyrnesse. I just suggested that I lead him because of your responsibilities as the leader of our group. There are taboos about off-world women touching shamans, so I just reasoned with him in the most efficient way I knew how. Do you agree, Gaultor?"

"These are the times of the End Star," Gaultor answered evenly. "The taboos were made to protect the people, not the reverse. I will gladly follow *fedd Aramus.*"

"Then let's head out," Palmer said, turning toward the east. The conduit beacon flashed among the trees. "Cogs, are the tranz boosters on full power?"

"We hear you fine, Colonel," Adams' interruption from the ferryship rippled with a chuckle. "Couldn't resist."

Palmer smiled. "Good enough." Then vocally, "Let's head out."

The conduit access station proved to be farther away than Palmer had guessed. Out of deference to Gaultor's blindness they moved slowly.

Distant calls echoed through air fragranced between cantaloupe and cinnamon. Exotic birds glided above them, unconcerned. Through the visor, they glowed yellow-green against the black cool of the night.

Palmer stumbled over some underbrush, recovering. He glanced back. Cosgrove watched after Lenore who carefully led Gaultor through the darkness.

"Colonel," Adams tranzed. "The unidentified ships have just withdrawn." There was a mixture of relief and caution in his transmission. "The sky is clear."

"Excellent," Palmer replied. "Any idea why they pulled?"

"Negative. They may have tried to raise us. We'd never know."

Palmer walked among fern-like bushes and trees. His mind puzzled. If it had been Mhyrrians who had scrutinized them, why not simply attack the Federation intruder? If they were friendly, why not approach, once their offer of assistance went unanswered? They could surely conclude damage as a possibility for no reply. It just didn't figure. Why had they come, done nothing then and gone?

"Colonel," Adams tranzed evenly. "What should we do?"

"Hold on." Palmer suddenly remembered he had a Mhyrnian he could ask right here.

"Gaultor, a fleet of ships just came, scanned us, and left. Our comm board is out. We could not hear any message they may have tried to send. We believe them to be of your people. Do you have any idea why they might leave without some further action?"

The smoldering, green shape of Gaultor turned toward the sound of his voice. Palmer saw puzzlement in his expression.

"Do you *know* that they were of my people?"

Adams' tranz interrupted. "We got a good visual stored while they were scanning us. As far as we can tell they had only one marking on them. It looks sort of like a double-notched arrowhead engraved in the tail section. There were no other markings."

Palmer repeated Adams' message to Gaultor.

"The emblem your pilot describes is that of the Brotherhood of Light. The ships probably belonged to elite guards of the Cities of Zorl. It is amazing, for when I left Mhyrn there was no such brotherhood. Its return has been prophesied—yes, it has been prophesied."

"If they found us here—this Brotherhood of Light—would they attack or leave us in peace?"

Gaultor hesitated. "That would depend. You say they scanned your ship?"

"Yes."

"And now they have withdrawn—sending no message?"

"We can't know if they tried to contact us."

"As you said." Gaultor looked as if he were agonizing over the problem. Twice, he shook his head.

"The Brotherhood is the extended arm of Zorl, merciful to the weak and terrible to resolute evil. That is its creed. They would either have helped or attacked. Inaction would be unthinkable."

"And how quickly might they have decided whether to attack or assist? Might they have withdrawn to consider?"

Gaultor shook his head. "It is possible, but I cannot say. I am sorry."

"Thank you," then he tranzed. "Suggestions?"

"We could break out ground-to-air ordinance, as a precaution," Adams tranzed.

"I concur," Cosgrove added.

"That might be interpreted as a hostile act."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, Colonel." Cosgrove replied. "The Ahrgolians are now safely away from the ship. Everyone who isn't essential is away. The ship is our only ticket out of here. We need to protect it."

"Yes," Palmer agreed. But deploying the defense ordinance would be a token gesture, at best. What could a few depolarizer cannons do against a battleship and fifty fighters? He said as much.

"Remember our hijacker." Cosgrove replied. "It may be the Combines we have to worry about, not the natives. Shouldn't we set up some sort of defense against *them*?"

"Good point. Proceed with deployment. Fire up the ship's batteries as well. Go to full alert."

"Affirm," Adams' tranz fell silent.

They reached the UV beacon. It flashed invisibly until Palmer tranzed his visor to UV. The beacon all but blinded him in its deep blue intensity. An UV chaser surrounded the entrance, marking its location. Cosgrove stepped forward and tranzed his identity code at the lock. Seconds later, the sound of machinery vibrated through the huge, curving wall of the conduit. The reinforced metal door opened. A hiss of escaping air gusted in their faces, carrying odors of exotic molds. The smell was neither decaying protein nor dry rot, and yet some of both. Portastrobes flickered to buzzing, reluctant life beyond the opening. Twisted webs and hanging, tungsten-red vines draped

and stretched from the high, arching ceiling.

Palmer tranzed his visor up while Lenore let go of Gaultor, who squinted against the new light. Cosgrove drew his depolarizer and stepped carefully inside. He jumped, looking down at the ground. The thick, violet carpet of mold moved aside beneath his feet.

"It is harmless," Gaultor said calmly. "My people call it the creeping earth."

Cosgrove breathed easily. He looked down first one stretch of conduit, then back toward the city. "It looks safe," he said finally. Palmer and the others followed him inside.

The violet mold that covered the floor and walls of the conduit rippled with waves. Its edges engulfed the vines with soft prickling sounds and occasional hisses.

"How far?" Palmer asked Cosgrove.

"I studied the layout of the city on our way here. About a kilometer to the dome, then up inside. Once there, we can follow the UV beacons, assuming they're operational."

Palmer drew his depolarizer, noting that his chameleon robes looked like the metal of the conduit encroached upon by tungsten-red vines and creeping violet molds. He set the power level high. "Let's go," he said quietly.

Strange echoes flanged before and behind the group as it moved down the tunnel. Everywhere, the creeping earth slithered away from the intrusion. The vines swung limply. Sometimes they seemed to snap and fight as the crawling mold intruded into their domain. The smell of fungus grew pungent the deeper they penetrated the conduit. Lenore hastened forward to walk beside Cosgrove. He said something Palmer could not quite hear and she laughed, pushing aside several vines that nearly touched the floor.

The conduit stretched away as far as they could see. Rose-colored lights shone about every fifteen meters. Some were so clouded with fungi that they were nearly dark. So far there was no movement other than the creeping earth. Palmer suddenly remembered that the conduit entrance was still open.

"I'm going to close the door," Palmer announced. He tranzed the hoversleds into lie mode, cloaking all traces of the landing party from any scrutiny short of physical contact. Next, he tranzed the door closed. The door mechanism responded by rumbling sliding and occasional screeches that ended in a reverberating clunk.

As the journey to RoseStar turned to a routine, Palmer fell into step beside Gaultor. The looming Mhyrnian walked along in silence. His face was set in concentration, perhaps on something far away or far in the past; perhaps recollections of home.

Since the memory of Markeeome's glowing brilliance was still vivid in Palmer's mind, he considered whether to further explore the incident now or later.

The vision was so vivid. He could still see the billowing flares of a silver radiance; Gaultor's face reflected in a light that wasn't there. Palmer studied his recollection of the Mhyrnian's expression and saw wonder, joy, and fear all intermixed. How had he missed *that* when he had first seen it?

"Gaultor," he said quietly.

The Mhyrnian looked over at him as they walked along, shaken from his reverie.

"Can you tell me more about the light I saw at Markeeome?"

"Colonel—I would that you might tell me everything you saw—everything you *felt* as you gazed upon it."

Astonishment swelled in Palmer at the tenderness in Gaultor's voice, and there was something else as well – something he assumed he would never hear from him – something he had

yearned for ever since the shaman had stood defiant before him back on the ruined world of Ahrgol. It was respect. Gaultor's voice nearly quavered with respect.

Encouraged, Palmer repeated what he had seen, adding a description of the emotions he had felt during the experience: peace and joy and urgency blended in a way he could not understand. He marveled at how the clarity increased with each recollection. Details enhanced themselves as he sought to scrutinize them. He informed Gaultor of this, and the Mhyrnian, studying his face, nodded, then looked forward again.

For ten minutes they walked along in silence. Only Cosgrove spoke and sometimes laughed in low, echoing bursts some twenty meters ahead. Palmer waited anxiously for some answers from Gaultor.

"It has been many years," the Mhyrnian said at last, then nothing more.

Palmer waited—perplexed and anxious. But the Mhyrnian walked on, lost again in reflection.

Palmer fought the need to ask about Markeeome again, for he had inexplicably arrived at the conviction that Gaultor knew what the strange experience meant. It was a conviction that had no basis in logic. No basis in reason. But then what he had seen and felt from Markeeome and the comprehension evident on Gaultor's face also defied logic and reason. Most amazing of all, Gaultor had not seemed surprised at the event. He had seemed almost as if he had been expecting it. There was a look he remembered in Gaultor's face. His words to Palmer revealed recognition of what was happening. All these things pointed to Gaultor having the answers. Perhaps he had answers to many more things than Palmer could suspect.

And so he waited.

"I see now the providence of the Creator in sending me offworld." Gaultor said finally. Palmer listened intently.

"RoseStar was my home, Federation Colonel. My father was a holy man, a Most High Nobleman and devout believer in the ancient Ways of Light. In the times of the Federation's great power here, we came to live at RoseStar. I remember days of grave fear, for we were not welcome among your people. We were tolerated, for my father sat upon the Council and wielded much power, even among your people. Even so there was oppressive hatred for us."

"Why did he choose to live among people that were so . . . hostile to him?" Palmer asked.

"I sometimes asked my father that. He usually replied that 'all things had their opposites' and that it was good for us to learn tolerance."

"Hmm," Palmer nodded.

"But one day he gave me a different answer. It was the day before . . ." Gaultor's voice closed in upon itself. He hesitated, and when he spoke again there was a trembling in his resonance.

". . . The day before the awful massacre among my people." Gaultor paused, introspective. "He said that we lived in RoseStar that we might be preserved."

Cosgrove's laugh startled Palmer. He looked up and saw him laughing with Lenore about something, shaking his head.

"Try to keep it down," Palmer tranzed Cosgrove evenly. "This is Gaultor's childhood home and the city's dead."

"Sorry, Colonel." Cosgrove's tranz came back subdued. "I guess I just sort of forgot. I started to let down a bit."

"Well, that's okay. Just keep it down."

"Aye, sir."

Gaultor's voice regained its control. "At dawn the next morning, vigilantes of the

Federationists moved against the Outer City of Zorl. They all but destroyed it, killed its priests and Noblemen. They even slaughtered the Most High Council, of which my father was a Prime member.

“But, you see, we were not there to die with them. Before dawn that morning—even as the vigilantes gathered around the Outer City—my father awakened us, saying that Zorl had spoken to him in a dream, commanding us to escape Mhyrn for Ahrgol, and that we were to leave immediately. We dressed quickly, took our scriptures and enough wealth to obtain passage to Ahrgol and to live there. We lifted from Mhyrn as the sun rose. It was not until a year later that we heard about the massacre. We learned of it through news reports concerning the reprisals my people were only then taking against the Federationists: their outraged assault against RoseStar.

“When my father heard of it, he feared greatly for us. We again prepared to escape into the mountains of Ahrgol for safety.

“And then, one morning,” Gaultor’s voice fell to a whisper, “the morning that we were preparing to leave, my father sent me to the city to obtain several last items and supplies—many of the things we already had. I wondered why he would send me to obtain more than we needed. I almost questioned him about it, but I held my peace. I was determined to be uncomplaining and obedient. Father told me to take my scriptures with me on my errand. That surprised me, for our holy words are most precious, and we were never to take them outside where we might lose them. It wasn’t until later, thinking back upon the experience, that I recognized a kind of sad expression upon my father’s face as he handed me the sacred books. He quickly pulled me to him, embraced me for a long time, then bid me hurry. As I think upon it now, and have many times in the past, I believe he must have known what lay ahead.

“I obtained the provisions—food and clothing. As I returned along the roadway, all alone, I heard a hushed voice, kind but insistent. It told me not to return home, but to go straight up into the mountains. I knew that I must obey it, for it was the voice of Zorl. But my love for my family was too strong, so I returned home carefully, and by stealth.

Gaultor shut his eyes tightly for a moment, shaking his head. “How I wish I had heeded that warning and not returned home.” He took a deep breath, holding it, then whispering his words intently. “I beheld a scene of such awful horror that . . .” his voice fell away as if searching for words that could never frame the emotions that flooded through the him. “It was a vision of hell . . . incredible . . . a heinous carnage . . . a bloodbath.”

Gaultor hesitated. His eyes were almost glassy. His lips were taut, quivering now as he began to speak. The trembling in his voice made him sound old, tired—sick.

“Many refugees made up of your people, having been cast out from RoseStar, had fled to Ahrgol for safety, it being so proximate to Mhyrn as your vessels travel. Looking for a place to hide from the justice of your Federationist laws, they came across my father, mother—my brothers and sisters. They were angry and filled with vengeance.”

Gaultor’s voice fell to a barely intelligible whisper.

“They murdered all my family in a most cruel manner, torturing them unto death—spilling their blood, even our precious blood, into the ground.”

Palmer listened, his stomach ill from trying not to visualize the account Gaultor recounted.

“I watched because I could not pull myself away. When death finally rescued their spirits to the Creator, I nearly flung myself in anger at them—I, but a small boy. But the voice came again unto me, commanding me to run into the mountains—and quickly, lest I perish also.”

As Gaultor recounted his escape into the wilds of Ahrgol, Palmer found himself beginning to believe Gaultor’s incredible story—even that part about escaping from the mobs based upon some



small, whispering voice—Zorl’s warning voice.

He struggled against that growing conviction, not really knowing why. And as part of him accepted the veracity of Gaultor’s words, for the first time in his life since the death of his parents, Palmer felt the beginning stirrings of real hope again. Even now, as he thought upon it, his heart burned with conviction.

But why struggle? Was it because all of this was beyond his experience and, therefore, seemed to defy logic? That must be it. And he still struggled against it while deep down embracing it all the more fully.

Gaultor continued.

“After I had escaped into the high mountains of Ahrgol, I took up my life alone, in the wilds. I grew to adulthood and found myself struggling with great doubts concerning the Ways of Light, including the Great Plan of Zorl. In anger and defiance, I prayed to the Creator, demanding to know why he had allowed my family to be so brutally slaughtered.”

Gaultor shook his head, seemingly incredulous at what he had just confessed to Palmer. “One does not demand such answers from God. But I was outraged. The vivid image of torture upon my loved ones burns yet in my mind. And as I struggled to rise above those awful recollections, I questioned my beliefs. I could not understand why the Creator, through Zorl, would preserve my family’s life by removing us from Mhyrn only to let us die on Ahrgol.”

Palmer hesitated. What had Gaultor just said—that the Creator had spared his life *through* Zorl? But wasn’t Zorl the God of Gaultor? He asked him as much. Gaultor reflected for a moment, and then replied.

“That is a common misconception, and an understandable one.

“Our prayers are dualistic, you see. Zorl is not the actual name of The Creator. When we address The Creator, we seldom call Him by His true name, for it is Most Sacred and we do not wish to blaspheme by its too frequent repetition. Instead, we call Him by the name of one of His servants.

“Zorl is one of The Great Ones; beings of deep righteousness, given power to govern good works in our realm of Creation. In matters of The End Star, we address the Creator using the name of His servant Zorl, for Zorl has been given power over it. Zorl knows of its comings and goings—when it shall destroy and when it shall save. He has a plan to save us. Therefore, the ways of Zorl are the ways of the Creator—though not all.

“The protection of the name of deity is an ancient concept. It extends far beyond this Cosmos—back among and through countless universes before this. And it will continue forward, forever.”

Palmer thought about this. It seemed unnecessarily complex to have so many names for God, and yet it did explain things. The Mhyrnians did not wish to profane, and they had chosen this method to preserve the sanctity of the true name of their Creator. He now understood why Ambylor the Martyr had dared address his god by the name Zorl in the simulacron back on Ahrgol. It had been the beginning of the days of the End Star.

It wasn’t really so hard to understand. It was rather elegant. Palmer found himself admiring the great care with which the people of Mhyrn revered their god. It testified of a sincere humility.

That was it! That was what Palmer had seen in Gaultor’s face, lit by a private, silver illumination. It was *humility*—a willingness to love, to endure and to obey a higher power and to have peace of heart in that obedience, even in the face of destruction. Whatever else Gaultor might be, he was a being of uncompromising integrity and faith.

Gaultor regarded him for a moment, and then continued.

"As I said, I could not understand why the Creator, through Zorl, would preserve my family's life by removing us from Mhyrn only to have us die on Ahrjol. Then I remembered that before his death, my father had bestowed upon me all the powers that had been bestowed upon him as Prime of the Council, saying that I would someday serve the Creator in a marvelous way, even when the days of Procyx should be full. These were and are the days of Procyx's destruction—even its fullness.

"Persecutions have been prophesied in our scriptures, and there were and are yet persecutions and deaths, as if in fulfillment of those sacred words. Yet among them all, I have been preserved. And there may be others, here on Mhyrn or out among the stars, who have also been preserved to serve the purposes of Zorl.

"I was but a child, as I grew alone, in the mountains. I could not imagine how I, a single Noble One, perhaps the last of all, could serve the Creator on Ahrjol. But as I grew in age my doubts were supplanted with a great desire to serve my God, so I established a community of the followers of Zorl. I studied our scriptures." Gaultor looked at Palmer. Did he see in the Mhyrnian's eyes a flashing of silver highlights—a power akin to that which he had seen on the summit of Markeeome?

"Martin, in those early days of my youth, a dawning understanding began to grow upon me.

"Since my birth, my father had often read to us from the scriptures that terrors would most surely befall the devout followers of Zorl, but that the Creator's purposes would be preserved. As I studied those teachings again and again, I believe I understood this much: in the face of the seeming destruction of our sacred ways, I survived on Ahrjol—I, the son of the Prime and Most High Nobleman of Mhyrn—he in whom all orders of Zorl's plan rested. Though the Great Prime of the Council had been killed, I, his heir, had been preserved. The ways of Zorl had been preserved in their purity—even in the face of probable Apostasy back on Mhyrn. I must have been preserved for a purpose. And I believe I know now what it is. I . . ."

Palmer gazed transfixed as Gaultor hesitated. He sensed within the Mhyrnian a powerful struggle to reveal or not reveal what that purpose might be.

"I am sorry," Gaultor said finally. "I can say nothing more."

"But the lights I saw on Markeeome, Gaultor. I saw them, I know I did. What were they—really? You know the answer, don't you? I know you understand many things that I cannot. Those lights were real, weren't they? Tell me that they were!"

Gaultor did not look at Palmer, but his voice quavered with emotion.

"They were real, and I have truly told you what they are: the Power of the Creator manifested to whomsoever He chooses. Markeeome is the roof of The Sleeping One's tomb. It is a focus of an irresistible power, even the power of The Fifteen—the Holy Vessels of Light in which reside the salvation of Zorl against and for the days of the Procyx . . ."

Gaultor gazed steadily at Palmer now, his eyes piercing him to the very center of his being.

". . . And only Seers can behold the glories of Markeeome."

"Seers?" Palmer whispered, not understanding.

"The Chosen among the children of Zorl—descendants of the Master," Gaultor replied, his voice powerful in its conviction. "The Seers are they who, if they but choose to follow the ways of Zorl, will be among those who will save all from destruction."

There were tears in Gaultor's eyes. Palmer did not fully understand all that the Mhyrnian had told him. He did not know what mysteries Gaultor yet held sacred within him, but he found himself

believing that everything the Mhyrnian had told him was true, even those things he had not understood.

“Colonel,” Cosgrove trazed. “I believe we’ve reached the city.”

Palmer looked ahead. Cosgrove and Lenore stood beside the closed, vaulting entrance of the tubeway. The hanging, violet webs and vines were profuse. Massive metal doors sealed the entrance to the city beyond. Palmer jogged forward to the security lock.

“I already tried it,” Cosgrove said when he arrived. “It doesn’t respond.”

Palmer trazed his own clearance. A moment later, the rumbling hums of long idle machinery echoed through the tubeway. The huge doors that led into RoseStar opened before them.

**To be continued in the October 2002 issue of *Deep Magic*...**

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you a single piece until I know more. Now where would Ticastasy go? You know she has no family left and no place to stay but here. Who did she go with? The Drugaen?"

"I think so, but I can't be sure...it's Hate's own truth. I swear, she left that night. I think they both went with that Sleepwalker, I don't know..."

Roye grunted as the Tsyрке grabbed his shirt and hauled him up on the counter top. "What in blazes are you talking about?" he thundered. "A Sleepwalker was here?"

Roye winced and panicked. "Calm down, now! Calm down! He wore all black, like I've heard they do. Even 'Stasy thought he was a Sleepwalker." He tried to shrug but couldn't in his position. "He started coming to Sol 'bout the same time you left on your last run."

Tsyрке released him and he collapsed on the counter. He gripped the ale mug so tightly that Roye was certain it would shatter. "His name?"

Waving his hand, the tavernkeeper said, "Oh, Tsyрке, how was I supposed to remember? She always got to know the folks..." Tsyрке grabbed the fistful of Roye's shirt again and jerked him closer. "Oh Hate, Tsyрке! Calm down, now. Jamin? Jorim? Something like that. How should I know who he really is? Only 'Stasy could tell you for sure, and she's not here."

Tsyрке shook his head, unclenching the cloth shirt. He stared at the counter top, his fists balled up tightly and he breathed out slowly. "And you think she went with him? You suggest she went away with this Sleepwalker?"

"I don't know," Roye said, sinking his face into his hands. "I swear to you by the king's crown, I don't know anything more. They both left me. The Drugaen and her. Like a privy stall in a high wind!"

Tsyрке pushed away from the counter, looking once more at the cup of Spider Ale before him. He started to reach for it and then closed his hand. "You can't even remember the man's name. Blustering idiot. Do you know where they went – where they were headed? You don't remember anything at all? Why did Secrist start a fight?"

Roye shook his head. "It's ruined me. There was a knight..."

Tsyрке bowed his head and muttered a dark oath. "No wonder there was a fight." He rubbed his forehead. "Secrist would attack a knight from Owen Draw on sight. Ban it, ban it, ban it."

Roye suddenly remembered. "Oh, and there were Shae here too! Never paid for their drinks either, the whoresons. There were four of 'em – no! The four came looking for this young one. There were five! He sat over there and slipped out when the fighting started. I don't remember it very well."

"You were probably hiding under a table," Tsyрке said acidly.

"But then the Sleepwalker came in at the end and took the boy away, and 'Stasy and Flent went with him I think. They were all huddled up in that corner over there, talking at that table." He lifted his head and pointed.

Roye blinked with surprise. There was a man in black robes sitting at the table that had been empty all night. His bowels turned to ice. "Who in Achrolese's name are...?" His voice snipped off mutely and he stood frozen.

Tsyрке straightened and turned. He peered into the dark corner of the tavern. "Mage," he said simply. The Sorian met him in the center of the tavern where the center beam looked as if an axe had gone to work on it.

The Sorian's voice was soft. "There was enough blood spilled here to tell a great many stories. They're going to Landmoor."

Nodding, Tsyрке went to the door and pulled the crossbar up. He tugged the door open. A

gust of wind careened into the tavern, tossing Roye's hair wildly, but he stared at empty space. They stepped back into the mist-shrouded city and passed over a snoring drunk lying in the street.

When the door shut behind them, Roye awoke suddenly from the daze, startled. He slowly lifted his head, blinking. His eyes went from the booth in the corner to the front door rattling with the wind. Scratching his throat vigorously, he thought a moment. "Who was I talking...?"

He wiped his mouth and started shuffling across the floor. He dropped the crossbar into its cradle, securing the door, and rubbed his scalp. "Could have sworn I'd locked it already," he muttered to himself, taking a swallow from Tsyрке's half-sipped cup.

\* \* \*

It was a searing pain inside his heart, growing more unbearable with each step. She was gone from Sol – beyond the reach of his protection. She was heading towards the most dangerous region of the kingdom. He swore softly to himself, cursing the winds that had blown against the sails. He was late. Too late.

Glass lanterns hooked on tall iron poles lit the misty cobblestone street. The quavering howl of a sewer mutt echoed from an alley across the way. The air smelled like an old wharf – a familiar, comforting scent to a man who had spent nearly his whole life at sea. The sound of Tsyрке's boots scraped on the gritty stone before thumping on the soft wet wood of the docks. "How long have you been waiting for me?" he asked the Sorian.

"Stop a moment, my friend. You need to steel yourself for what's ahead. The cravings will be strong tonight."

Tsyрке nodded and stopped, leaning back on a dockpost. He wanted a drink so badly he could hardly think. He rubbed his eyes, trying to banish the images of Ticastasy's smiles. He was tempted to yank out his sword and try splitting the dockpost.

"I was surprised when I did not find you here already, Commander. Bad weather? The fog?"

Tsyрке shook his head. Mage was trying to help. Trying to focus him on his responsibility. He was the Commander of the Shoreland Regiment, not an Ilvaren sea captain. Focus on the title. Always focus. "The business in Harper Ket delayed me. I bought the homestead in Ishtol."

"A place for the girl?" Mage asked with a voice void of judgment.

Tsyрке knew he could hide nothing from the Sorian. It wasn't possible. Yet the green-eyed old man still asked questions – even ones he knew the answers to. They were as different as a breeze and a gale, but something had always kept them blowing in the same direction.

"Did you pester my grandfather with questions about his women?"

"Always."

Mage had helped Tsyрке's grandfather establish the League of Ilvaren. A famous man, his grandfather – Kiran Phollen. His grandfather's red cape had survived the ferocity of the Purge Wars. It had outlived the man who had worn it. Now, after so many years, skirmishes, and petulant seas, Tsyрке found himself commanding one of Ballinaire's regiments. Ballinaire – the hero of the Purge Wars turned traitor and rebel himself. Ballinaire – the man who had persuaded him to join the Rebellion. And hate every banned day of it. Tsyрке was tired and quickly moving past the fire of his youth, but he still had the stubbornness of a galleon shoving its way through a tempest. Becoming Lord of the entire Shoreland region was tempting. But it was just not worth it any more.

He swore under his breath, realizing he had ignored Mage's question. "I'm sorry. Lost in my thoughts. Yes, you know I bought the homestead for her, Mage. Not quite the same as making her a

queen, but that probably wouldn't have happened anyway. I'm stunned that she's not here. But she can't be at Landmoor. Not this soon. Did she go with the Sleepwalker?"

"I don't know."

Tsyрке snorted as if Mage were joking. "What do you mean you don't know? I doubt there is anything on this banned world you don't know."

The Sorian gazed at him and smiled. "We've known each other too long for flattery, Tsyрке. Let us just say I am not totally certain of his whereabouts. He is certainly more than an average Sleepwalker because I wasn't able to read his past."

"He's warded then," Tsyрке said gruffly. "Pretty good ward, too, if a Sorian can't break it."

"I didn't bother," Mage replied. "I'm familiar with the wretches of Pitan and all the mutations that Firekin can create from it. Like the Drugaen. If the Sleepwalker used Firekin, he would have been under my dominion. He kept himself hidden in Silvan magic, which is why I hesitate to label him anything."

"Shae magic? Not stronger than a Sorian?" Tsyрке pointed out.

Mage shrugged. "I'd rather not have to find out, Commander. In the old days, the Shae held dominion. But this man wasn't a Shae."

Something cold went down Tsyрке's spine. He let out a low whistle. "For all our sakes, I hope not. Show me what happened that night? Did my brother truly come barging in like an oaf?"

Mage nodded, his eyes glinting with anger. He withdrew an orb of orange fire from his robes. "The Firekin will show you everything. Look into the flames and see the past."

Tsyрке did. He watched the flickering pattern of light reveal the Kiran Thall, his brother's company, disturb the Foxtale. He had come early, responding to Tsyрке's orders, but had chosen to bring the entire company instead of leaving them outside the city. A knight from Owen Draw was there also – not the Knight General, but one sent by him. Even a few Crimson Wolfsmen had joined the fighting.

Tsyрке seethed with disbelief when the light winked out. "Ban it, the knight probably thought he was baited into a trap. There is no way he's going to trust me now. Ban it!" He rubbed his eyes. "A bloody quare too. Why were they here?"

"For a young Shae who came in before your brother. He's warded too, so I don't know who he is, but he went with the Sleepwalker and Ticastasy. The Sleepwalker said very little – but he did say they were going to Landmoor." His eyes glittered with amusement. "And when he said it, he looked right at me, as if he knew I would be watching him from the Firekin later."

"Then the Sleepwalker is a fool for baiting a Sorian," Tsyрке snapped. "He can die just as the others have. But somehow he found out about Ticastasy." He shook his head angrily. "He's kidnapped her. But who hired him? I've heard Folkes is using the Gray Legion."

"I don't think Folkes could afford this one. Come, let's return to your ship. We need to return to the army as quickly as we can."

They started walking again.

"Who hired the Sleepwalker? Dairron?"

"It's difficult to say," Mage replied. "But that was my first thought."

"Why?"

The Sorian gave him an arch look. "Because the Sleepwalker gave the Shae a bag of Everroot."

Tsyрке stopped and gripped Mage's arm. "Everroot?" he said in a strangled whisper. "How in Hate's name did he get a bag of Everroot? There isn't any Everroot any more. It was all destroyed when Sol don Orai burned! That was five hundred years ago. You told me it would never return."

"I did say those things. But I was wrong. Do you remember the meeting with Lord Ballinaire you missed?"

"I don't give a ban about Ballinaire or his meetings," Tsyрке snarled. He wanted a drink again. He muttered a few more choice curses and turned down the pier where his ship was docked. The sound of creaking boats smothered the noise of his steps. He was furious. Things were tumbling out of control. Their carefully laid plan – their most secret plan – was about to be ruined. He risked everything, not least of all his own life.

Tsyрке closed his eyes and tried to steel himself. When you play high stakes in Bones, you trust in your luck. Too many players. Too many risks. Mage walked patiently next to him, waiting for him to master himself again. The Sorian was all ice inside. He had been playing this game for centuries with nations poised as the bet. This little affair with Dos-Aralon was probably too insignificant to get excited about.

"I tried to be back for Ballinaire's meeting," Tsyрке explained, more calmly. "But the homestead took longer than I thought and I had to hurry here to meet the knight. You went to the meeting to represent me. Is Ballinaire going to sit still down in the Shadows Wood long enough for the knights to nab him?"

A wan smile flickered across Mage's mouth. "He's not planning to sit at all. He's starting a war with Dos-Aralon. Just like we persuaded him to do."

"He's starting it now?" Tsyрке asked. "If the knights of Owen Draw can't summon their troops quickly enough, they'll never engage. They keep sitting there, waiting for Dairron's army to come out of the Kingshadow. I need those knights down here!"

"I know this doesn't suit your plans, but it suits Ballinaire's. You cannot change the coming of the tide, Commander. He's ordered you to bring the Shoreland regiment and occupy Landmoor. You only have a week or so to do it. I told Hallstoy to start mobilizing when I passed through your regiment."

Tsyрке let the air slowly out of his lungs. "My regiment is not enough to stop Dos-Aralon. When they bring down the Amberdian Army and those fools from Cypher – they'll crush him. Our plan isn't going to work if he destroys my regiment by using it as bait and leads a counter-attack from the Kingshadow."

"It's the other way around," Mage explained. "He intends to use Dairron's regiment as the diversionary one and he'll attack Dos-Aralon with yours. He plans to do it personally."

"Is he mad? They'll see us coming and have plenty of warning!"

"You're missing the point, Tsyрке. The tides have changed. The waters are deeper now. Miestri found a grove of Everroot in the Shadows Wood and turned it over to Ballinaire. He showed it to us at the meeting. He has cartloads full of it. I've seen an army use it before, Commander. Dos-Aralon could send twenty times its number and it would still fall. Every Bandit soldier wounded will be totally healed and strengthened the next day. Some will even come back from the dead. You can't stop an army like that. And remember, the Sleepwalker had a sample himself. That is why I suspect Dairron is behind this. I don't think he wants Ballinaire to succeed any more than you do. He's always wanted to make a pact with the Shae. And it looks like he's lured this young man out of Avisahn."

Tsyрке bowed his head as he walked and rubbed his temples. Anger boiled up and steamed inside of him. "Yes, this rings true. Dairron found out about Ticastasy. He sent the Sleepwalker to abduct her and a Shae." *It was just like him*, Tsyрке thought bitterly. With Dairron plotting to succeed Ballinaire, he would go to any lengths to be sure that Tsyрке served him or had good reason not to

interfere. Tsyрке knew that if he pretended Ticastasy did not matter to him, Dairron would kill her for spite.

Mage nodded. "He mentioned something to that effect at the meeting. He has had eyes on your regiment for a while now. After all, his isn't nearly large enough. And how else would the Sleepwalker know that I would be here later?"

"Only a Sorian would know a Sorian," Tsyрке replied. "You people are too devious, it's hard to keep up with your games. You are right. It's as obvious as spring after the thaw. Dairron wants Lord Ballinaire dead as much as I do. But for the wrong reasons. The banned wrong reasons." He knew Dairron wanted to bring the Rebellion to a boil. But not Tsyрке. Tsyрке wanted it finished. "He wants me out of the way, and he would stoop to use a banned Sleepwalker to do it. Of course Miestri would ward him against you. He'd never leave a clear trail. Tell me the rest, Mage. I doubt it could put me in any worse a mood." He looked up the dock and saw the ramp to his ship just ahead.

"Folkes will bring his regiment across the Yukilep in support of yours," Mage answered softly. "Dairron was ordered to attack from the north to draw don Rion off, exposing his rear – the city of Dos-Aralon itself."

"I'm not a fool," Tsyрке said angrily. "It's like asking two thieves to watch your back. Does Ballinaire really trust them to obey?"

"Does he have reason to trust you?" Mage asked wryly. He paused a moment, letting the words sink in. "He's convinced he will win. As I said, there is a grove of Everroot in the swamps and Lord Ballinaire has it. He has an army surrounding it and harvesting it. He has two Sorian to advise him. There is nothing but open plains between the Shadows Wood and Dos-Aralon. He still needs you, my friend. He still needs you. If we are quick and clever, we can turn this around. If we can get to that Shae lad before the Sleepwalker brings him to Miestri..."

Tsyрке clenched his fist in frustration. The hinting taste of failure was bitter in his mouth. He could lose it all, slipping right between his fingers like water. He sighed and shook his head. "The knight was the key, Mage. The key to our plan. I can't fight Dos-Aralon *and* Ballinaire *and* the Shae."

"You're not listening to me," the Sorian soothed. "The tides change with the moon. I've seen them change long enough to see the pattern. Listen to my counsel. Miestri is the youngest Sorian among us. This is her first real conquest in centuries since she seduced a Shae watchpost. I've juggled dozens more complicated than this. Hear me out. Dairron's intention is to bring the Shae into this, but maybe we can forestall him. We need to understand who this Shae lad is. He was warded for a reason. He is the linchpin, Tsyрке. Find him, and we can turn this around to our favor."

"And how do we find this Shae boy?"

"The same way we find the woman you care for," Mage answered. "She still has that pendant you gave her, and she's only in Castun right now. And with my powers stirring the wind, we'll be in Landmoor by dawn."



## XX

*It must always be hot in Castun*, Thealos decided. Nothing protected the hamlet from the scorching prairie winds of the lowland plains. Both the eastern and western edges of the land had rivers to draw in the mist and chill the air, but the Shadows Wood blocked all of that, leaving the northern borders of the forest to swelter in the heat.

"Only fools live in Castun," Sturnin Goff muttered. "Neither side cares to fight over it."

Thealos agreed with the assessment, though he wondered if the people were truly wise for living in a place that no one wanted. He frowned as they walked into the dusty streets. The only buildings that had survived were the ones made of stone and thatch. Sweat dampened his clothes and skin, and the dust clung to him like chalk. They were all weary from the hard walk, and from a distance the town seemed like a chance to escape the heat of the plains. But the refuge was only an illusion. Lopsided cabins hugged a central main square of tall taverns, trading posts, and a few smith-yards that looked as if they would sigh and collapse into dust. A line of splintered fences surrounded the hamlet and divided it. Smoke drifted from the thick chimney of the nearest forge, and the grunt of horses and mules broke the stillness. There were an uncommon number of graveyards, Thealos noticed – some fenced and sheltered, others open and overgrown.

"This is the only trading post this side of the Shadows Wood," Sturnin said wearily. "A way-station that brings Sol and Dos-Aralon to Landmoor. There's only one road cut through the forest, called the Iron Point Road, and there are more thieves and Bandits than trees."

Thealos nodded. With the Bandit Rebellion so powerful in the south, he wondered just how many still considered it safe to travel. He glanced over at the knight. "The town is small, Sturnin. Why so many graveyards?"

The knight shook his head and shrugged. "Some plague years ago. Blamed it on the Shae, I think. You'll be fine as long as you keep with me."

"The Shae were down here?"

"During the Purge Wars."

"Never been to Castun," Flent said, hooking his thumbs in his buckle. He walked between Thealos and Justin, keeping a watchful eye on both of them. The Warder Shae kept his head bowed and said nothing, but Flent had chattered enough for both of them. "Heard there wasn't much to see here." He snorted and spit on the ground. "Guess they were right. Hope they have some ale barrels, that's all I have to say."

Thealos glanced over his shoulder at the Drugaen. Flent seemed a little unsure of himself. He was probably missing Sol more than he cared to admit. "I thought the same thing when I first went to Sol. It's a wreck of a city, Flent. Even Dos-Aralon has gardens and flowers."

"Who cares about bloody gardens," the Drugaen laughed. "I miss the ale! The best ale in the world comes from Sheven-Ingen, and it costs a fortune up north or out this way." He sighed. "Sol may not be pretty on the outside, but the beaches! Loved walking those beaches." The Drugaen sniffed and shrugged. "But if I was going to move, I'd go find a shack in one of the Shoreland cities farther south, or maybe an island. Windrift is nice enough, I've heard."

"If you're an outlaw," Sturnin muttered under his breath.

"The Shoreland?" Thealos said with a wince. "Sun, rain, and mosquitoes. It's awful. Why not move to Dos-Aralon? It's expensive, but the wages are better. There are even a few Drugaen settlements up there. Those that don't want any part of the war with the Krag."

Flent shook his head in disgust. "Can't stand Inlanders." He glanced at the knight and his eyebrows rose apologetically. "No offense, Sturnin. No offense. Every kind of folk passin' through Sol has stopped by the Foxtale once or twice. But it's the sailors I like. They've got stories and things to sell. The ocean is always cool – none of this banned sun baking your brains." He glared up at the sky. "I'm not always going to unload barrels and toss out troublesome folk. Gonna buy my own ship some day." He chuckled. "Won't that be a first! A Drugaen galleon."

Thealos grinned. He was searching the taverns and brothels for a sign of the Catpaw Inn. From the slanting porches of homes, he saw a few curious and some angry stares. "The Port of Jan Lee has a beautiful harbor. Puts Sol to shame."

"Never been there," Flent sniffed. "But I guess that's because your people won't let others in."

Thealos shook his head. "They let *some* people in, but I'm sure the ale merchants find the business rather poor," he added with a grin. "It's beautiful to see, but you would probably die of thirst in there, Flent."

They turned the corner and started down the main street to the south, toward the entrance of the Iron Point Road. A dog stared at them, its sad eyes bemoaning the heat, and its tail wagged sluggishly. It yawned and then dropped its head back down on the deck. They stopped to rest by a wooden post near a chandler shop, and Thealos wiped the sweat from his neck. He scanned the street and discovered a well-painted sign bearing the name of the inn they were searching for.

Crossing the street and shoving open the door, Thealos blinked, letting his eyes adjust to the shade. Thick stone walls kept the main parlor cool. The smells of baking bread and lamp oil greeted them. The common room was half-empty, filled by a few loggers and a solitary woodsman in the far corner of the room, sipping from a cup. The woodsman nodded to them and went back to his meal.

"Not bad...not bad at all," Flent mumbled, nodding with appreciation. "Better than Roye's place."

"Get us a table, Flent," Sturnin said. "I'll talk to the innkeeper and ask about the girl." He brushed the dust from his upper arms and approached the man behind the bar counter.

Thealos quickly caught the knight's shoulder and stepped around him. "I can do that, Sturnin."

The knight paused, giving him a steady look. But he backed off. "I wouldn't try slipping out the back, lad," he said quietly. "I mean to see the Sleepwalker here."

"I hadn't forgotten," Thealos replied with an even tone. "But I doubt he would have left you a message, would he?"

The innkeeper was a gaunt man with friendly hazel eyes and a receding hairline that was well salted and wispy. He had crooked teeth but a warm smile. "You're a long way from home, my friend," he greeted with an easygoing grin. "If home is Avisahn."

"Are you the owner?" Thealos asked, leaning against the counter.

He affirmed it with a nod. "My name is Talbin. You must be Thealos." He kept his voice low. "Why don't you join your friends and I'll bring out some dinner for you. The girl you sent ahead has been fretting since she rode in."

"She's safe," Thealos sighed with relief. "And Jaerod?"

"Ssshhh," Talbin replied, wiping a mug clean with a towel. He glanced over Thealos's shoulder and looked at the woodsman in the far corner. "He should be back tonight. I've got two men out looking for him."

"Why?" Thealos pressed, concerned.

“Because that man over there is waiting around to kill him.”

\* \* \*

The woodsman watched them with open interest. Thealos felt the man’s eyes probing their table. The Warder Shae sat like a recluse, withdrawn into silence because no one but Thealos knew Silvan. He merely asked for a cup of hot water and proceeded to make an herbal tea. Flent bit into the greasy pork platter and trencher bread and washed both down with a huge mug of Spider Ale. Sturnin chewed at his meal, his eyes straying more than once to the woodsman so intent on them.

The woodsman’s hair and beard were pale brown with a few grizzled edges. What surprised Thealos was the man’s clothes and weapons. He was clearly an Inlander, like Sturnin, with long hair and sunburnt face and hands. But his long bow was distinctively Silvan, a strong yew bow. A sheaf of steel-tipped arrows hung from a quiver at his waist with the styled markings of Silvan fletchers. He also carried a tapered long sword with fine hilt work, possibly made by the Shae as well. His cloak was a mottled color of greens and browns. When he caught Thealos staring again, he nodded respectfully.

“Do you know who that is?” Sturnin Goff whispered to Thealos between bites.

“No,” Thealos answered. “Do you?”

The knight nodded and dabbed his bread in the thick gravy. “I’d bet a month’s pay he’s Allavin Devers, probably the best scout in the realm.” Sturnin nodded with confidence. “He’s loyal to the Duke of Owen Draw, but he lives with your people. Or so I’ve heard. Do you know the name?”

“No,” Thealos replied, risking another look. “He lives with the Shae? Where?”

“The Riven Wood,” the knight answered. “A small community. But he wanders up and down the Kingshadow, tracking the Bandits for us. I’m going to go have a talk with him.”

“Finish your dinner first,” Thealos said, stalling him. “He doesn’t look like he’s in much of a hurry to go.”

The knight’s eyes glinted with anger. “You’re a pushy lad, aren’t you? I’m not here at your command.”

“Or my invitation,” Thealos countered. His anger had flared too quickly, and he struggled to wrestle it back down. “I don’t seek a quarrel with you, Sturnin,” he said. “We came here for a reason. When Jaerod arrives, you’ll get to ask your questions. Now be patient with me a while longer.”

Over Flent’s shoulder, Thealos spied Ticastasy emerge from one of the rooms at the top of the stairs. She looked straight down the hall at them and smiled. She was wearing the gown he had given her. It fit her well, its violet trim matching the ribbon that held her hair back. The hem was long, covering the tops of her soft leather boots. Descending the stairs in a rush, she came up behind Flent and gave him a hug.

“Flent, you smell like a gutter!” she complained, wrinkling her nose and giving him a hard hug. “It’s good to see you.” She gave Flent a little shove, but aimed her smile at Thealos. “Thank you for the gown, my lord. It fits better than I hoped.”

Sturnin raised his eyebrows in between bites of food. Thealos hooked the chair leg next to him and pulled it out, offering her a place to sit. She slipped in it, planting her elbows on the table. Her hair was freshly washed and clean and her skin smelled of scented soap. She wore the tinkling jewelry she had in Sol, except this gown made her look even better.

“It actually fits a little snug, Quickfellow,” she said in low voice. “Are you sure you didn’t

mean it for the Silverborne princess?"

Thealos chuckled at her banter. "I told you, it wouldn't match Laisha's coloring." At the mention of her name, Thealos caught Justin's surreptitious glance. "She wears green damask or blue silk and sapphires. It looks well on you, Stasy."

"Thank you," she replied, blushing. "Are you serious about her gowns? I've heard she has a hundred made each year."

Thealos smiled and leaned back, folding his arms. "An exaggeration to be sure."

"Really? Then is she as beautiful as they say?"

"Well... what do they say?" He couldn't help feeling a little guilty talking to her so freely. He did know Laisha Silverborne and her taste for fine cloth – which was served by the Quickfellow family among others, of course – but suggesting a degree of intimacy was more than a little misleading.

"They say," she replied with a saucy air, "that a man who catches sight of her will fall all sick in love and act like a fool until she's gone." She looked at him pointedly. "Did that happen to you?"

Thealos smiled. "If I remember right, she did make me forget my name. I was younger then, but does that count?"

"Now you're boasting," she accused.

He shook his head. "Boasting is clearly against the Rules of Forbiddance," he replied. "I don't want to give you the wrong impression, though. She likes her gowns well enough, but I wouldn't say I'm an insider as to the variety of her apparel. In Avisahn every year there is a grand ball at the palace. I've danced with her and exchanged pleasantries..."

"You and how many others?"

He grinned. "Two hundred, I think. She's a good dancer."

"Well I can cut a good caper too, Quickfellow." She leaned forward and rested her cheek on the flat of her hand. "You need a bath as bad as Flent does. Isn't it Forbidden to be this filthy?"

"I imagine it's written somewhere in the Rules," Thealos agreed, stifling a chuckle. He saw Justin's disapproving look and felt a stab of guilt. She seemed to notice him for the first time and raised her head. "Who's this?"

"After you left, there were five more Krag, and they were holding a prisoner." He nodded to the Shae Warder.

She looked at Justin. "And where are you from?"

"He doesn't speak the king's common," Thealos answered. "Only Silvan and a little Drugaen."

She nodded and looked more resigned. "I don't think he likes me."

"He doesn't like humans in general. Don't be offended."

"You don't seem to mind us." She gave Thealos a direct look.

"Most of the Shae in Avisahn have never left its boundaries." He brushed crumbs from the tabletop and gave her a sidelong look. "What they know about humans they've learned from the Council Elders. Many of your ways are Forbidden to us, and so they fear what they do not yet know." He hesitated, not wanting to lie outright. "I've...known a few barthers, you see. The ones who trade with Dos-Aralon and other nations. There are many humans I wouldn't trust to hold a sterling coin for me. But there are others," he nodded respectfully to her, "who I would trust." He knew already that she thought him a Silvan lord. He didn't want to ruin that image, to confess that he was only a barther's son. He managed to keep it from his face, but the deception was starting to gnaw at him.

She took his compliment and tucked it away with a smile. "I like the Catpaw," she said, staring up at the rafters. "They have baths upstairs, if can you believe it. You are certainly a wealthy man. Talbin said that Jaerod spared the best rooms for us."

"Did you see him when you arrived?"

She shook her head. "No. But Talbin promised he would come back for us. I arrived this morning and must have missed him." Her eyes fastened to his. "I was... worried about you."

Thealos stared across the table at Flent who tore at his meal like a wolf. Sturnin also politely ignored her over the noise of his plate, but Justin's eyes were wary and watchful.

"*The human is coming,*" the Shae Warder warned in Silvan as the woodsman approached their table.

Thealos turned in his chair.

"Now this is about the oddest scene I've come across in a long while," the stranger chuckled, planting his strong hands on the back of Thealos' chair. "A sturdy fellow from Owen Draw, a Drugaen, a pretty lass who must be the king's own sister, and two Shae. *Greetings to you both, in your language.*" He smiled as those who didn't know the Shae speech raised their eyebrows curiously. "Odd company for Castun. Hope you don't mind the intrusion. My name is Allavin Devers."

"There's an extra chair," Flent said, nudging one open. "Flent Shago. Glad to meet you."

Allavin nodded and sat down, his hand grazing the pommel of his sword. He had the low and confident stride of a cat. An odd-looking scar ran alongside his nose, deforming it slightly. "Thank you. If you don't mind, I will join you."

"*You speak our tongue,*" Justin said with a hint of disdain.

"*I do,*" Allavin replied without rancor, in flawless Silvan. "*And I live among your people as well.*"

"And what brings you to Castun, Allavin Devers?" Thealos asked, directing the conversation away from Justin and deliberately changing the language. "You are a man of reputation I understand."

"A small one, if any. I've spent some time in the Kingshadow, Iniva, Yukilep," He replied with a shrug. "Or anywhere the Bandit armies go." He nodded to the knight from Owen Draw. "This part of the country hasn't seen many of your rank since the Accords of Dos-Aralon were struck after the Purge Wars. What brings you this far south, Sturnin?"

The knight chuckled. "You recognized me. I thought I knew you, Devers. You tracked for us several years ago. We even hung some Kiran Thall because of it." He took a sip of ale from his mug and dipped the rim towards Thealos. "I've been following this Shae since Sol."

Thealos was getting more and more uncomfortable. He tried to nudge the conversation off course again. "Are there really Shae left in the Riven Wood?" Thealos said. He wanted to stave off any reference that might make mention of the Sleepwalker.

Allavin leaned back and folded his arms. "Maybe two hundred, if that. The village in the Riven Wood used to supply provisions for the watchpost of Jove Stand in the Kingshadow. They haven't had word from Avisahn in at least a hundred years. But my weapons are from Citadellian. That's another watchpost in the Kingshadow – the southern end. You heard of it?" Thealos nodded. He hadn't learned about them in Avisahn, but Jaerod had used a charred stick one evening to map them in the dirt. "No matter. A good group of Shae. All of them." Thealos saw pain in his eyes, a rush of emotion that seemed to burn.

"And what are you doing in Castun?" Thealos asked.

The woodsman's cheek twitched. His countenance fell and his eyes narrowed with some awful memory. He glanced at the faces around the table. "Not long ago, I went with a group of Shae

scouts into the south borders of the Shadows Wood. The whole banned Shoreland regiment is holed up there right now." Sturnin stiffened, and the woodsman nodded. "Hate's own truth, Sturnin. It was Tsyke Phollen's regiment. Just sitting there, getting ready to siege Landmoor. Phollen isn't there yet, but word is he's coming."

Ticastasy's eyes went wide with shock. She glanced across the table at Flent who shared her expression.

Allavin shook his head in disgust. "But they're not just waiting to siege the fortress. They were digging up something in the swamp. A strange plant or root – looked like moss. Ballinaire himself was there overseeing it."

"Fury," Sturnin Goff muttered in awe, leaning forward. "Ballinaire himself is down here? We had heard he was still rotting in the mountains. I wish I had been there to cleave his head from his shoulders."

"No," Allavin replied, coughing. "No, you don't wish you were there. I was the only one who made it out alive."

Thealos felt his heart pinch in his chest. "What happened to the Shae..."

"Killed to the last man," Allavin replied grimly. He looked hard at them. "By a Sleepwalker."

## XXI

"I'm sorry to hear that," Thealos told Allavin earnestly, rising to his feet. He kept all expression from his face, though his stomach clenched with worry. "It's never easy losing our friends. Linger with us. I'm sure you and Sturnin would like to talk." Without waiting for a response, he retreated to a window seat and sat down. *What am I doing here?* he asked himself.

The Catpaw Inn was warm and comfortable. A cool breeze had finally dispelled the awful heat of the day. Thealos folded his arms, breathing in the rich smells of spicy stew and bread and feeling nauseated by it. He stared at the reflections in the window glass. It was too dark a night and poorly lit outside to see much more than the image of the common room painted on the glass by the lamps inside the inn.

Back at the corner table, Sturnin conferred with Allavin. They spoke in low tones, using the table in front of them as a map of the land. The tracker was drawing out where the Bandit armies had positioned themselves – or at least when he had last seen them. A Bandit regiment had gathered in the Shadows Wood. How far away?

Flent nudged Justin's elbow, flipping through a stack of Bones and trying to teach the game yet again to the Warder Shae. Justin sipped from his cup of tea, withdrawn and impassive, his eyes straying to the other patrons in the room. There were smiths and tanners and woodsmen at nearly every table now, and the Warder Shae seemed to shrivel up as he glared at them all. Thealos decided to talk to him later and give him some measure of Shae companionship. He looked very miserable and edgy, though not as much when Flent spoke to him.

"Don't tell me you can see anything out there," Ticastasy whispered over his shoulder, her voice soft and mocking. She brought him his goblet of Silvan wine.

He cocked his head and gave her a weary smile. "No," he said after taking a sip. "But we like others to believe we have eyes as good as a Drugaen's."

She sat down next to him on the window seat, their legs brushing. She leaned back against the polished oak siding, regarding him. Her hair was slipping free of the piece of violet fabric, loose and combed.

"I feel a little out of place here tonight," she said, glancing at the common room and shaking her head. "Don't get me wrong, it's wonderful watching the other girls doing all the work. But part of me feels guilty – like I should be helping with the dishes or something."

"This place is a little slower than business in the Foxtale. I imagine ships dock at the wharves at all hours."

"Yes, but the mood is much nicer here. Talbin is wonderful. It would be easy working for him. See how he asks the girls gently, doing everything in the shadows. Even when that girl dropped a platter, he didn't fuss." She shook her head. "Roye would have started swearing."

Thealos nodded in understanding. "It's...quiet here."

"It's only quiet because it caters to men like you," she replied, giving him a pointed look. He shrugged.

"I can't figure you out, Quickfellow," she said with a hint of a pout.

"What do you mean?"

She folded her arms. "I've known a Shae or two over the years, but never a Silvan lord." She smirked. "We don't see them too often on the Sheven-Ingen wharves, but I'm sure they visit Sol now and then. You have the looks of a barter's son," she fingered the fabric of his vest. "But maybe you

just want to look like one. That's what I thought at first. But then the Crimson Wolfsmen came looking for you. I'd heard of them but had never seen one fight before. It's not that easy to cut down a horseman of the Kiran Thall. All of these things make you different. And then there's the Sleepwalker." Her eyebrows raised. "Your protector? Your...traveling companion? But I can't quite put the pieces together. If he's your protector, why leave to come here ahead of us?"

Thealos saw her frustration and couldn't help chuckling.

"Why is that so funny?" she demanded.

"Are you always this prying?" he asked.

She arched an eyebrow. "I don't make a habit of running off with strangers, Quickfellow. I've known you only a few days and suddenly I'm sitting with you in a respectable inn miles away from Sol with the strongest urge in the world to throttle the truth out of you." She smiled when she saw the shocked look in his eyes. "Oh, don't take what I say too seriously," she said, shifting the tone of the conversation. Her voice lowered. "What I'm trying to say – and probably not doing a very good job – is that you... intrigue me. And not many people in this forsaken kingdom do."

Talking with her helped settle the twisting feeling in Thealos' stomach. He saw the admiration and curiosity he was arousing in her, even though she was only a serving girl from Sol. He didn't want to tell her the truth, that he was a Kilshae in all but name, that Jaerod had saved him from being killed by a band of Dos-Aralon thieves. He could see the respect in her eyes for the enigma. Even Sturnin Goff offered a grudging respect and had remained silent about Jaerod in front of Allavin Devers thus far. Though Thealos didn't doubt for a moment whose side the knight would take when a confrontation finally came. He wasn't as sure of his own decision yet.

Thealos squeaked his thumb around the rim of the goblet. "I hope you're not too disappointed when you figure me out."

"Disappointed? You gave me a gown I'd never have spent money on for myself. You've put us up at a very nice inn to keep us safe. You've treated me like a lady, Quickfellow, and not a stupid human churl. I never forget a kindness."

"Or a debt or a good cask of ale from swill, I'm willing to barter," he joked. The street was hidden in the glare of the glass. Nestled in the window seat next to her, it truly felt as if they were alone in the world. "I'm from a different world than you," he admitted. "I miss Avisahn. I miss my family – especially my little sister. I'm also a long way from home. There's nothing like a walk through the city at night. The smells that linger in the air."

"I've never even seen Avisahn," she said, staring down at her hands. "I wish I could say I'd been as far as Dos-Aralon, but I can't. Flent and I...we live our lives from the memories of others. Sailors tell more lies than Shae barter," she gave him a wink, "But sometimes it's nice to imagine going there someday."

He wasn't offended. "Do you speak any Silvan?"

She shrugged. "Oh, a few words here and there. Some of the words are a lot like the king's common, but the words have different meanings. At least that's what I've heard. Like the word 'fire' – it means magic or power or light."

"That's pretty good," he complimented. "Words you use like *fire* or *silver* or *quick* have many meanings in Silvan. You've paid attention to some of the details. Being close to barterers, I've known many humans myself. Mostly the cloth traders in Dos-Aralon. You can learn a lot from a cloth trader, though. You learn what people are wearing in the high court of King don Rion, or what colors the Duke of Amberdian fancies these days." He shrugged. "You also hear about the colors that are important to the Shoreland cities."



"Is this about money, Quickfellow?" she asked, her brows wrinkling with the hint of disgust. "War always raises the prices on everything. Not as much silk and satin are sold – soldiers need wool for blankets and capes and liveries." She regarded him coolly.

Thealos shook his head. He had learned in recent days how easy it was to give away too much. He was more guarded with Ticstasy. More deliberate. "I can see why you would think that, knowing my people as you do. I'm not after gold." He held up his hand when he saw she was about to interject something. "There are many in Avisahn who would like another war between don Rion and the Bandits. Doesn't matter who wins or loses, both sides will need supplies. I've no doubt that you've heard my people are, above all else, money-dealing thieves who can't be trusted."

"That is exactly what I was going to say," she replied. "But you're saying that's not why you're here?"

"No, I'm here for other reasons. That plant that the Bandits are digging up, the one that Allavin mentioned at the table. That's one of the reasons. There are others as well. But none of those reasons are about wealth. Believe me, my Correl is wealthy enough that I'll never lack for it. But when Jaerod comes, maybe then I can tell you the rest. Agreed?"

"Do you think he killed those men who were with *him*?" she asked, nodding her head towards Allavin and Sturnin.

"No," Thealos answered.

"Are you sure?" she pressed.

"Not unless he can walk faster than the wind," Thealos countered. "He's been with me."

"Oh," she replied. "I just heard somewhere that the Shae can tell when one of their kind is murdered. I figured that if he had done it, you would be able to tell."

Thealos chuckled. "Do you believe every rumor about us?"

"Well, I have yet to see you dance with the moon," she teased. "You're starting to change my mind about your people as a whole, Quickfellow," she conceded with a smirk and a nod. "I'd heard the Shae never give anything away." She smoothed the bodice of her gown. "That's just another ugly rumor, isn't it?"

Thealos felt a cold prickle go up his spine and quiver on the flesh of his neck. A chill rushed through him.

"Are you cold?" she asked, nudging closer.

"No," Thealos answered, looking out into the darkness once again. "Jaerod is here."

\* \* \*

The noise and gaiety of the Catpaw Inn hushed as Thealos gently shut the door behind him. He stood alone on the back porch of the inn, washed in darkness so thick that it took several moments before he believed he hadn't stepped off the edge of the world. As a Shae, he could see very well in the dark, but he wished he had the night vision of a Drugaen. The blue moonglow accented the rear street before revealing a tack and harness shop reeking of horses and leather. The heat from the day was replaced by a cold wind that knifed at Thealos' hands and cheeks. He stared down the street both ways, looking for the Sleepwalker.

"I'm over here." Jaerod's voice came out of the stillness.

Thealos nearly stumbled and his heart jolted. He calmed himself down. If Jaerod had wanted him dead, he would have let Tannon's band finish him in the woods. He had to remember that. The porch wrapped around the one side of the inn, and in the darkness Thealos had failed to see a small

wooden bench with flat arm rests. Jaerod was a smudge in the shadows.

"You startled me," Thealos said, walking over to the bench. He folded his arms and hugged himself for warmth.

"It's always a pleasure doing that to a Shae," the Sleepwalker replied. "I see that we've picked up some stragglers after Sol. The knight followed you?"

"He caught up in the Shadows Wood. He was looking for you."

"And so is Allavin Devers, I understand." He paused. "What about the one playing Bones with Flent? Another stray from Avisahn?"

Thealos saw the Sleepwalker's medallion against the dark fabric of his tunic. "Flent calls him Justin, but he can't remember his own name. We found him in the Shadows Wood under escort by six Krag Drugaen. He said they were taking him back to the Ravenstone as a slave. He's a Warder Shae..."

Jaerod was standing. Thealos took a half-step backward without realizing it. The Sleepwalker had risen so fast, his motion was just a blur in the blackness.

"A Warder Shae," the human said, interested. "Or should we say, *the* Warder Shae."

"You know him?"

"A Warder Shae was left to guard the Everroot," Jaerod answered. He paced away from Thealos. "When he wasn't down in the tunnels, I assumed one of the Sorian had disposed of him." He stopped and looked back at Thealos. "You don't understand a word I'm saying. Forgive me. His presence is a surprise, but one that will make a great difference in our favor." His voice whispered from the shadows. "Strange, isn't it, Thealos? It's as if the seasons have rolled on their wings, bringing summer, fall, and winter in the span of a week."

"You're not making any sense," Thealos said after a pause. His heart hammered in his chest. "Who are you...really? How did you know Justin was supposed to be there?"

"You're doubting whether you can trust me," Jaerod said. "Have I earned your trust so far?"

"Yes, but I don't know who you really are, Jaerod. You've already said that Allavin is waiting for you. I assume you also know why?"

"He thinks I killed a group of Shae scouts," Jaerod replied.

"Did Talbin's men tell you?"

"Yes. They were left to warn me in case the Kiran Thall chased you into Castun. Thealos, I don't have much time to waste convincing you of my sincerity in this matter. I've never shed the blood of a Shae. Take me at my word, or walk away from me. But I brought you here for a reason."

Thealos stood still, trying to feel if the man's words rang true. Vannier help him, but they did. "What do you want from me, Jaerod?"

"When I arrived in this land, I went into the Shoreland first. I was there long enough to search the ruins of the watchpost and to see what was going on in the Shadows Wood. From there I left for Avisahn to get you. Allavin Devers is also a *Shaefellow*. And so am I. This is all about the Everroot. Do you still have the portion I entrusted to you?"

"Yes," Thealos replied, patting the front of his vest.

"And you've been watering it?" the Sleepwalker pressed. "Give it to me."

Thealos withdrew the damp sack and pressed it into Jaerod's palm. He felt the tingling prick of earth magic leave him as he passed it over. The Everroot murmured to him soothingly, speaking to his Silvan senses of taste and sound.

There was silence between them. "You found it...useful?" Jaerod asked.

"It saved us against the Krag," Thealos answered, feeling the presence of the Everroot itch at

him. Somehow, it didn't feel right – it didn't *belong* in Jaerod's hands. The magic belonged to the Shae, to those who would use it properly.

"Hmmm. You used too much of it," Jaerod muttered. "As soon as I took it away, you began craving it again, didn't you? This is how it begins, Thealos. This is part of the danger inherent in so strong a Silvan magic. It's the nature of Silvan magic to want to harness and control it. Be careful, Thealos." Jaerod's firm hand rested on his shoulder. "Be very careful not to heed those feelings."

Thealos stared up at the Sleepwalker. "I don't understand. I've used it as you showed me..."

"No, you didn't. I only use it to heal others. Never myself. I'm thankful I didn't leave you alone with it for too long. By morning, the craving will have faded and you'll see it for what it is. You remember Tannon's Band, don't you? How much they wanted your blade? It's the same thing. Only, it feels different when it happens to you. I've never let Everroot heal me. And for this reason, I never will. Let me safeguard it for now, Thealos. Whether you use it again, I will let you decide on your own. *After* you've heard what I came here to tell you – what I brought you here for."

Thealos clenched his jaw. He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "I'll have faith in you a little longer then."

"Thank you," he murmured sarcastically. "I am a man of secrets. My particular profession requires that. Yet what I have to tell *you* tonight, the others have a right to learn too. It affects all of us. But right now, I'm afraid Devers won't trust me if I just walk in there and say I want to talk peacefully. I don't want to fight him or the knight and cause a stir that will have everyone's tongues wagging. I move in secret where I can. Go back inside and call a *Shaefellow Pax*." His voice dropped lower, more distant. "We don't have much time before the Bandits move out of the woods. It may even happen tonight."

## XXII

Xenon knelt in the dry scrub of dead cedar and turned earth and dug his fingers into the soil. His Shae senses were stung with fetid harshness, and the smell made him scowl as if he'd just breathed in the scent of a moldering corpse. Ashes and dross had been buried here – in the Silvan way. Yet beneath the corrupted soil, he felt in the distance the elusive presence of the Forbidden. The entire Shadows Wood reeked with it.

Xenon shook the stinking earth from his hand and muttered a quick prayer of purification to Keasorn.

"The Kilshae is keeping the traditions," Kitrey offered, bending nearby. The trowel marks were obvious beneath the layer of scrub.

Xenon looked at him. "Or pretending to." Kitrey was a little taller than Xenon, more willowy and graceful, but their skills were equal. Xenon rose slowly, seeing the glowing eyes of the brothers of two other quaeres with small lanterns. "There are too many tracks and confusing signs in this place," he announced, "But one thing is clear. Forbidden magic was used in this spot. This wayward child is swimming in deep waters. The instructions from the Sunedrion are very clear. He must be brought to justice."

Kitrey, Watcher Lor of the Inland, nodded in agreement. "Would you like us to find the boy and bring him to you in Sol, Xenon?"

Xenon shook his head curtly. "No, I owe him and his companion a debt for the brother we lost in Sol."

"But we've seen no sign of the Sleepwalker who was..."

"No one has," Xenon interrupted. He turned to another brother in the quaere. "Did you see sign or track of the man coming down from Avisahn when you followed the boy's trail?"

"No, Lor Xenon. It appeared to the very earth herself that the boy walked alone. There were no tracks from the gully to the campsite either. It's a Warder trick, I think."

Xenon nodded with satisfaction. "I do not know what powers he has, but the Sleepwalker is here, luring the boy into the Shoreland. It may take all three of our quaere's strength to find and subdue them. The Sunedrion is insistent. We hunt them."

The other glowing eyes narrowed with enthusiasm. Reaching to the pommels of their leaf-bladed short swords, they shared a communion of strength. Silvan magic welled up, making the grove glimmer with cool blue light. Xenon showed them his memories of the Sleepwalker and how he fought.

"He fights like us," one of the brothers from Kitrey's quaere murmured.

"No," Kitrey answered. "But it is similar. It is the old way. Who would have wasted such teachings on a human though? What a loss in...years. He'll be a withered leaf before long, Xenon. Then maybe you'll be able to catch up with him."

A murmur of laughter sung in the grove. Xenon smiled, sharing the savor of the joke through the magic's bond. It was not a taunt against Xenon as it was against the human he had faced. *He will not be so lucky when we next cross swords*, he promised himself.

"Should we send a hawk to Nordain?" another brother asked. "He's waiting word of Kil-Quickfellow's arrest."

Xenon shook his head no. "When we have the boy. *When* we have him."

He kicked at the mound of stinking ashes and the lamps around the grove dimmed into

blackness until only the pale threads of moonlight were visible. The Crimson Wolfsmen began to hunt again.

\* \* \*

Thealos had never called a *Shaefellow Pax* on his own before, but he knew the ritual well enough from Correl that he was confident he could do it. He understood immediately why the Sleepwalker wanted him to call the Pax. It was the quickest and easiest way to call a truce between him and Allavin Devers. It struck Thealos as odd how Jaerod didn't put himself in the forefront of things. He seemed to go out of his way to give Thealos the opportunity to lead and to be recognized for it. Regardless of his motives, Jaerod's plan was a good one.

The warm blast of hearthfire air greeted Thealos as he entered the Catpaw from the rear doors. The humans called the *Pax* a 'Truce Bargain.' No weapons or magic permitted, only words. The results weren't as decisive or glorious as a battlefield victory – at least not to the humans – but the Shae preferred to conclude matters with peace if possible. Under the authority of Vannier, the *Pax* were used to create long-lasting ties between barterers, partnerships and covenants that neither side would dare break – human or Shae. Thealos remembered one human merchant in Dos-Aralon who had broken a *Pax* with Correl. Both Shae and human stopped trading with him, and before the year was out, the man was ruined.

As Thealos entered the common room, he stared out over the tense faces. Ticstasy watched him from the table, her head cocked, her eyes intense. Flent was engrossed in a game of Bones, but Justin had raised his head when Thealos re-entered the room.

"Is everything all right?" Talbin whispered on his left, his eyes darting to the table with Sturnin and Allavin.

"It will all be fine," Thealos assured him. "Do you have a separate room in the back that is free?"

"Yes, do you need to use it?" When Thealos nodded, the innkeeper continued, "I'll get you the key. Do what you need to do."

Thealos stepped towards the table and called their attention to him. He swallowed, trying to remember all the words he was supposed to use. "As Thealos Quickfellow of Avisahn," he said, "I am calling a *Shaefellow Pax* – a Truce Bargain." As much as he didn't want to pronounce himself in front of strangers – where he was certain Nordain would find out about it – he had to follow the proper initiation. "The Pax concerns what has brought us here thus far and the Rebellion against the kingdom of Dos-Aralon. If you wish to attend, you must leave your weapons with the innkeeper and follow me to another room. If not, it is by your own choice." He gave Sturnin a level look. "Not even a dagger."

Their eyes were fastened on him. Thealos scanned his companions, judging for a reaction. He went over to Justin and whispered to him in Silvan that Jaerod would be meeting them soon and to follow him. The Warder Shae nodded suspiciously and scooped up his robes, following Thealos back to where Talbin waited with a key.

"You're calling a Pax?" Justin asked quietly in Silvan.

Thealos nodded. "It's the only way we can all meet without killing each other."

Removing his hunting knife and Wolfsmen blade, Thealos wrapped them in a blanket and handed them to the innkeeper. "Hold these for me." He took the key from Talbin and started towards the rear of the inn.

"You are truly calling a *Pax*?" Allavin called out from the table, his voice betraying his surprise.

Thealos stopped and nodded to the tracker. "You've been to one, haven't you?"

"To several," the tracker replied, rising from the table. "But never to one called in a human city. Or never without a Shae battle commander present." Allavin appraised Thealos shrewdly, then left his yew bow and quiver at the table and went to Talbin to turn in his Silvan-crafted sword. Thealos crossed the hall and unlocked the door. He lit the lamp and motioned for Justin to take the nearest seat. He leaned near him and promised to do his best to translate what was said. Arms folded, Thealos waited and watched as everyone came in. Allavin Devers, Ticastasy, Flent Shago, and Sturnin Goff. There were still plenty of chairs, but the room was cool and silent. They all stared at him.

Thealos trimmed the lamp oil, making the shadows richer. "I am not a Shae battle commander," he said, giving Allavin a wry smile. "But the Pax is appropriate tonight considering the dangerous news I need to share with you. I called this Truce Bargain because you will all learn something that affects the peace and safety of this valley. It does concern the Bandit Rebellion. And it concerns the Shae as well." Thealos carried the lamp in front of him and set it down on the table so that they could all see the glowing in his eyes. He stared at each one of them, as part of the Pax tradition, but only Justin's eyes were also made to glow by the lamplight. "My people are not often trusted in this valley, though it is our homeland. I won't contest whether it's a reputation we've earned or not. The danger which threatens this valley threatens my people as well." He looked at them seriously. "And so we're involved. From Owen Draw to Sol." A prickle went down his neck, and he knew Jaerod had entered the room even though he hadn't heard him.

Allavin's eyes widened with shock. Thealos glanced over at the door and saw Jaerod standing there, his sword belt gone. The medallion gleamed against his black tunic.

"*What have you done?*" Allavin whispered in horror, staring aghast at Thealos. It was the worst sort of treachery imaginable to murder at a *Pax*.

"*I came without weapons,*" Jaerod said in perfect Silvan. "*I will abide by the Pax.*"

Allavin scooted backwards, his chair screeching across the wood floor.

"Wait," Thealos said, giving the woodsman a hard look. "I have not broken the Pax by calling this man here. He is a *Shaefellow*."

"This man is a Shae killer," Allavin whispered, a look of anger and fear wrestling for control.

"No," Jaerod replied, shaking his head. He walked closer. "Never have I shed the blood of a Shae. Not once, in all my years." His gray eyes glowered at Allavin. "What you faced in the Shadows Wood was not a Sleepwalker. I can promise you that."

"How?" Allavin demanded. "How in the banned abyss can you promise me that?"

Thealos glanced at Sturnin and saw the look of determination on his face. The knight was judging whether he could take Jaerod without a weapon. The anger and tension in the room was sickening. Thealos stepped forward, cutting the quiet with his voice. "He has proof, Allavin. I asked him here to show it to us – to you. But I called a *Pax*. Do not forget that. The *Shaefellow Pax* forbid that any weapon be drawn in anger. There will be no fighting here. You must hear him out first. After you have listened, you may leave and do what you will. But not in here. If you profess to understand the culture of my people, you know you accepted it willingly." He stared at Allavin. "You cannot violate it and remain a *Shaefellow*."

Jaerod looked over at Thealos and nodded. He stepped back, letting some of the tension ebb from the room. He gave Thealos a commending smile. "If I didn't know who you really were,

Thealos, I'd have assumed you to be the son of a member of the Sunedrion."

Flent wiped his forehead and breathed out in relief. "Have a chair, Jaerod. There's enough for us all."

Allavin leaned back in the chair, his expression still coiled and tangled with doubt, but he gave the Sleepwalker a begrudging nod and held his tongue.

Sturnin spoke up. "I came to Castun to find you, Sleepwalker. But I won't dishonor the Shae by condemning you before hearing you. Tell us what you know." He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table.

Jaerod glanced across the room, going over each of their faces. "I'll stand, Flent. Thank you. My name is Jaerod of Safehome," he began in the formal tradition of the *Pax*, but the name *Safehome* caused Allavin and Thealos to stare at him as if he'd uttered blasphemy. "I am known by your customs as a Sleepwalker, though that is not what we call ourselves. I do not work for the Gray Legion or have ties to generals or emperors. My loyalty is to the Shae of Safehome. My order is the guardians of Safehome, the Shae city that first came to this world a long time ago."

"Came to this world?" Sturnin asked. "Or do you mean settled?"

"He means *came*," Allavin answered with a look of disbelief. "I've heard the legends. The Shae say that they came to this world on a city in the clouds and that it will return and bring them away when their work here is finished."

Thealos nestled back against the wall where he could see everyone clearly, including Jaerod. He folded his arms and listened. He knew of Safehome. But Allavin was right – it was a legend to even the Shae. How could he say he was *from* Safehome?

Jaerod sighed. "The Shae traditions you know tell a portion of it, not all. Safehome is not a city in a country or bordering the woodlands as you might expect. It is a city of peace. It did not leave the world with a promise to return. It never left. It abides here still."

"I don't understand," Allavin said. "There are many Shae anxiously waiting for Safehome to return again."

"I do not have much time tonight." Jaerod's expression was one of sadness. "Not enough to explain all that would be useful to you. Not enough to explain a hundredth of what I know about our enemies. And I am not here to tell you about Safehome and argue with you about what you may know of it. I am here because of your valley and what is happening here. I am not part of the Bandit Rebellion. Any part of it. War is beginning again in this land. A Bandit regiment has massed just south of us – about a day's march away – in the heart of the Shadows Wood. It is the Shoreland regiment, one of Ballinaire's three. The other two still threaten, but are not close enough to interfere yet. What threatens us this time is that Lord Ballinaire will not fight his war merely with weapons of steel and protect himself with armor. He has discovered in the Shadows Wood a remnant of Silvan magic – magic the Shae once controlled."

Reaching into his black tunic, Jaerod withdrew the damp sack of Everroot. He tugged open the strings and emptied the sack into his palm. The green moss looked almost black in the shadows, except for the buds of blue and violet. Thealos heard it sing to him and felt its craving stir his blood.

The Sleepwalker's eyes were unsettling. He looked at Allavin. "Is this what you saw in the Shadows Wood?"

Allavin nodded. "Yes, but we couldn't get close enough..."

"No, of course not. Ballinaire has a Sorian to guard it. There is no way you would be able to sneak past one. But a Sleepwalker..." He let the thought dangle in the air with another wry smile. "We have ways of getting past even them. This plant...this powerful bit of Silvan magic –" He

looked over the faces of those in the room before stopping and staring at Flent. "It can heal any wound. No matter how mortal." His voice dropped to a soft whisper. "Do you remember how it healed you, Flent Shago?"

The Drugaen's eyes widened. "That's how Thealos healed me in Sol?"

Thealos met Flent's look of surprise and nodded. He looked at Ticstasy. "You've seen it work too."

"How does it heal?" the knight asked brusquely, stroking his mustache.

"It heals by touch," Jaerod replied. "Press it against an injury. Chew on a stub for poisoning. Make it into tea for a fever." He shrugged. "It heightens the senses, makes you keen and focused with earth magic. But it needs water to rejuvenate itself. Simple, clean, water. As I said, the strongest of Silvan magics. It's name is the same in both king's common and Silvan. *Everroot*."

Justin's eyes widened at the word, and Thealos leaned over and quickly told him what Jaerod had been saying.

"How much does Ballinaire have?" Sturnin asked. "Just healing alone, it would benefit any army."

"He has wheelbarrows full of it," Allavin said, shaking his head. "They're scraping it off the trees and rocks. There was a waterfall there, a...a grotto in the woods. They were shoveling it into crates. But when they washed away the mud, it speckled just like that," he said, pointing a finger at the Everroot. "Just like that." The memory seemed to haunt his eyes.

"The army of Dos-Aralon will not be defeated easily," Jaerod warned, shaking his head. "The king can send ten legions if he musters his full strength and abandons the borders. But the Shoreland regiment is enough to bring it to its knees. Imagine it. A Bandit soldier – wounded in battle – only to rise again and keep fighting, strong and whole, the very next day. You could face the same army for days, for weeks. They never tire. They never die." The Sleepwalker sighed. "Round after round of bloodshed and destruction, the smaller force whittling down and outflanking the stronger. But it does not stop there. It does not stop with Ballinaire defeating Dos-Aralon. No, the lure of the Everroot is strong. After they win, the Bandits will fight against the Shae, then the Drugaen. They will bring down the Yukilep and Iniva and force the Shoreland cities to combine. And then as it happened before it will happen again. They will turn on themselves, leaving ghosts to walk the valley."

The banquet room was as quiet as ashes.

"It will happen again?" Ticstasy asked, her eyes intense and sad.

Jaerod scooped the Everroot back into the pouch and tied it up, concealing it back in the folds of his tunic. "I have been inside the Shae vaults in the city of Landmoor. It was once a mighty Watchpost, many centuries ago. Back during the days when this valley was one enormous forest that stretched from the Kingshadow to the Ravenstone." He looked at Ticstasy. "Your ancestors came to this valley seeking refuge from a great devastation. They pleaded before the Shae king with bitter tears to grant them sanctuary from the destruction and hate that was afflicting their nation." He smirked. "To be more exact, the humans had an Empire. The Empire of Sol-don-Orai." Thealos saw confused looks from others in the room, except Justin, who started and gazed at Jaerod intently. "Sol-don-Orai was one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, human empire. They tamed magics that shadowed the power of the Druids of Parath-Anatos. There was a Sorian there, one who could invoke the greatest possibilities of earth magic and Firekin. The records in Landmoor, they speak of riches and wealth and power beyond the greatest Shae king's court. An age of wisdom and opulence, the historians called it. But that wisdom was overcome by their own lust for power and



magic. Yes, the Empire of Sol-don-Orai had tamed kingdoms and principalities with dazzling flying cities that could plunder and destroy, carrying armies great distances without fatigue. With a Sorian who could command nature and cause crops to yield the richest grain and fruits, this empire was unstoppable. But when they tried to control the Everroot, when they tried to seize what they had no right to control, it destroyed them. As magic always will when handled improperly."

"You're speaking too quickly, Sleepwalker," Allavin said, shaking his head. "We've heard of Sol-don-Orai. At least I have. My understanding is that a great drought destroyed it five hundred years ago."

"No," Jaerod said. "Those who remember what happened to her were too ashamed to speak the truth." He looked over at Thealos. "Except the Shae. Obviously Thealos is too young to have ever known of her. But your *elcorrel* knew Sol-don-Orai, and the Quickfellow name was known there." He looked back to Allavin. "In the Watchpost of Citadellian, there are records dating back dozens of Silvan years. They describe the empire, though briefly. Landmoor was closest to Sol-don-Orai." He stepped around a chair, his back towards them. "This Empire discovered too late what happens when earth magic is controlled that should not be. As strong a gift as the magic is, it is also a curse. You see, if you deprive Everroot of water for more than a few days, it withers and dries. Its husk becomes a poison." He turned back, his eyes dark with anger. "Deathbane. As vicious in death as any poison to be found in nature. Metal is powerless against it. The rust and decay it causes make an armored horseman a casualty more than a strength." His eyes flickered to Sturnin Goff. "Arrows were made of the stuff. And entire legions of cavalry were hewn down like grass.

"Imagine how appalling it was!" Jaerod went on in a near-whisper. "The struggle when two armies wielded Everroot and Deathbane against each other. It was murderous. It was devastating. Refugees fled Sol-don-Orai. The borders were closed, trapping those who remained inside to meet the fate of the Empire. The Sorian who had guided them and preserved them – who had built them up from a small trading nation to the greatest power on this continent – they no longer listened to him. They were trapped by their need for the magic. When war consumes a kingdom, reason and hope gutter out first. And so the Sorian who created Sol-don-Orai destroyed it."

"Sons of fire," Thealos whispered under his breath. He couldn't believe all that he was hearing. His ears burned and his throat clenched tightly. They had never taught the full story in school.

"The Sorian killed them all?" Allavin asked, his brow wrinkling.

Jaerod nodded, clasping his hands together. "He stopped the rains. With the awful power they can command, the Sorian caused great winds to blow over Sol-don-Orai out into the sea. The clouds formed, but were cast over the sea before the rain could nourish the land. He invoked the drought and the Everroot dried up. The healing and regeneration stopped. And while the remaining armies fought over water, the motes of dust swirled in the air and began killing everything in the path of the winds. Within a few weeks, the Empire of Sol-don-Orai was no more. And the land became uninhabitable. The greatest, richest nation, crumbled into dust."

"The Dust Plague," Thealos said, nodding in agreement. He looked to the others in the room. "We are taught that it was Forbidden magic that destroyed the humans there."

"Indeed," Jaerod replied. "Deathbane is Forbidden. And that is one Rule of Forbiddance that I would certainly agree with."

Thealos stared at the Sleepwalker. "The rest of it then, Jaerod. Tell them why we must go on to Landmoor. Is it too late yet to stop the Bandits from controlling the Everroot?"

"It is too late to stop them from seizing it," he answered. "But not from keeping it. The Shae witnessed the destruction of Sol-don-Orai from afar – from the safety of the trees. But even then

there was fear that the war would spill over the sea and into this valley and drown the Kingdom of Avisahn in its wake. The Shae did not want to destroy the Everroot like the Sorian intended to do. It is Silvan magic – earth magic from their home world. It has a proper place and must be used appropriately. Deathbane was Forbidden to them. That had to be destroyed. And so the Shae appealed to the Mages of Safehome for an artifact. One that would defend them from the smallest motes of Deathbane or the great evil of the Sorian. They requested this artifact to keep the struggle of the Everroot away from the valley.” Jaerod pursed his lips, silent now, pondering. “An artifact was given to them. They called it the Silverkin Crystal. It was never used. It is still in the Shoreland – still at the Shae Watchpost in Landmoor where it was intended to be the first line of defense in case the struggle came here.” The gray eyes sought Thealos’. There was more – Thealos knew there was more. The door creaked open.

“Jaerod!” Talbin warned from the doorway. “A company of Kiran Thall just rode into Castun!”

## XXIII

"Could be Secrist's men," Sturnin Goff said, looking at Jaerod. "Or maybe from the Shadows Wood. I think I'd like my sword back now."

"They won't be from the main regiment," Jaerod answered, glancing back at Talbin. "There were no orders to march on Castun. It must be another company."

Thealos stepped forward, his stomach twisting with the shock of all the news. He felt an urgency to get to Landmoor, before the Bandits could take the city. "How long should we stay?"

The Sleepwalker frowned, angry at the sudden interruption. "I don't want to be penned in here with so much happening near Landmoor." He scanned the faces of those around the table. "What I told you all tonight is not common knowledge in this valley. The Silverbornes of Avisahn would have records of the Everroot and the destruction of Sol-don-Orai. The older members of the Sunedrion might even recall the deal they struck with Safehome. The humans of Dos-Aralon have forgotten why they came here, or where they came from." He crossed over and put his hand on Thealos' shoulder. "I cannot fetch the Silverkin Crystal. Only a Shae can retrieve it. And there are those in Avisahn who will speak against getting involved, unless there is proof. The Crystal will be that proof. I am a *Shaefellow*, Allavin. Now you all see why Thealos and I must go to Landmoor – we would stop this kind of destruction from happening. But I can't do that alone. And Thealos shouldn't have to carry the burden himself." He looked to the others. "We need you. As many as are willing."

A hush fell over the room. Thealos felt everyone's eyes on him – there was newfound respect and admiration for what he was doing. He liked the taste of it, though his heart hammered with fear inside his chest. An artifact of Silvan power to stop the threat in the valley. Only a Shae could get it. Again it struck him that Jaerod was using him as the focal point instead of himself. He swallowed his own nervousness.

Thealos gripped the edge of a chair and faced the others. "I would be grateful for any help you offered," he said, looking them each in the eye.

"I fear if we don't get to Landmoor before the army reaches it," Jaerod said, "The destruction that happened in Sol-don-Orai will start all over again."

Sturnin rubbed his mustache. "The fortress will hold for a few weeks, I think. Don't underestimate the city's defenses."

Jaerod shook his head. "It will fall in a day, Sturnin Goff. I just pray that day is not tomorrow."

\* \* \*

Secrist Phollen jerked the reins of his lathered gelding, drawing a snort and a shuddering backstep from the beast. He studied the face of the inn – the hazy glass of the windows, the high roof supported by huge timbers and stonework. It was a marvelous thing – would be a pity to torch it. He chewed on the Everroot, feeling the flavor dance in his mouth. It tingled inside him, making his senses knife-keen. He saw better than he ever had. He was stronger than he ever was. Faster. Dangerous. He loved the feeling the 'Root gave him.

Checking down the lines of the cavalry gathered next to him, he watched the puffs of steam rise from their breaths. Lantern fire splashed across the Catpaw, illuminating the crevices and

stonework.

"She's a beauty, just like they've said," Bralt said with wonder after letting out a loud whistle. Secrist glanced over his shoulder at his chief lieutenant, who was admiring the inn. For men who lived in the saddle, marauding the lowlands day and night, nice inns were a luxury.

"What else do they say?" Secrist snapped sharply.

Bralt rubbed his black stubble and shrugged. "Only that a Sleepwalker watches over the place. Friends with the innkeeper...I think."

"I don't give a ban about a Sleepwalker." Secrist snorted, feeling a rush of the 'Root inside him. "You ever seen one?"

"Nope. Known a few fools who said they did...but they were drunk at the time." The hardened lieutenant grinned smugly. "This is where your brother's girl and the Shaden went. Give the orders, sir."

"Carnten and Roth – make sure the rear is still secure. I don't want Jhef and Brendin asleep back there. Kill anyone who tries to slip out."

Carnten nodded and went one way, while Roth took the other, joining the few in the back. Secrist wasn't worried. He had enough horsemen to raze the town if he wanted to.

"What about the knight?" Bralt said in a near-whisper from behind. "He's bound to be with them if we read the tracks right."

"I'll hang him," Secrist said coldly. "We're here for my brother's girl and that Shaden. And if we're lucky," he added with a sly smile, "A Sleepwalker too." The 'Root made him giddy and he chuckled, not feeling the bite of the cold at all. "Let's get in there, Bralt."

Kicking free of the stirrups, Secrist left the gelding prancing in the street. He unsheathed the tapered blade belted on his hip. The pommel felt cool to the touch. He wanted that Shaden's weapon, though. The short, leaf-bladed sword. That would fit so nicely in his hand. He'd cut the boy's throat with it. Ear to ear.

Secrist tested the handle of the door and it opened, letting out a torrent of hot, clotted air. He inhaled the smells of the room like fire searing his lungs and scanned the tavern hall for signs of his quarry. The woodcutters and miners gathered at the tables looked up at him and then went back to the decks of Bones and dice cups. No knight. No Shaden. No Ticstasy.

Secrist felt his anger snap and flare up, surging inside him. They were supposed to be here.

"Good evening, rider," the innkeeper said, wringing out a towel and drying another tumbler. "What can I get you tonight?"

Secrist glanced at the fine iron-work of the chandeliers. His men filed in behind him, taking measure of the place. Too pristine. Too orderly. It lacked a sticky floor and clove smoke. Not the kind of tavern Secrist liked. The innkeeper kept staring at him.

Secrist approached the bar. His boots thudded on the hardwood floor as he walked. He looked at the innkeeper's nose, fighting off the urge to crush it against the counter top. He wanted to kill someone tonight. It itched inside him. Bralt and the others filled in the room, bringing the crossbows out to menace the bystanders.

"I'm here for the Shaden whelp," Secrist announced, staring straight into the innkeeper's eyes.

The innkeeper didn't flinch. "Which one?"

Secrist scrutinized him closer, his forehead wrinkling.

"I asked which one?" the innkeeper continued, setting down the tumbler and towel. "I had two here tonight. One in robes, very sickly. The other was better-dressed. Looks like he had some

money. You looking for that one?"

Secrist stared at the man. "You Talbin?" he asked.

The innkeeper nodded.

"I hear a Sleepwalker watches over your place. That true?"

Talbin stared at him, his expression guarded. "What can I do for you?"

Secrist didn't like the innkeeper's tone.

Grabbing a fistful of the man's shirt, he yanked Talbin up on the counter top and pressed the naked steel of his sword against the slope of the man's throat.

"You think a Sleepwalker's going to save you?" Secrist seethed. He sliced into the man's neck so that blood dribbled down from the cut and stained the table. Talbin blinked quickly, flinching, but he didn't move.

"Never presume with a Sleepwalker," Talbin warned, his eyes flinty and stubborn. "Not a wise thing."

"Not a wise thing crossing a Kiran Thall either," Secrist countered. "I thought you fools in Castun would have heard that by now." He looked around the room, watching for anyone to challenge him. Nothing. He felt Talbin swallow, his eyes turning white with panic.

"Just a rumor then?" Secrist taunted. "A fool's rumor?"

Talbin said nothing.

"Then it's too bad for you," Secrist chuckled, jerking the sword back to sweep the innkeeper's head off.

Secrist's arm locked behind him and he felt a rush of wind as he was thrown backward onto the floor. Shouts of surprise rang in his ears. He was stunned by the blow and waited for the 'Root to bring him around. Crossbow strings twanged and bolts thudded into wood. Opening his eyes, Secrist saw the Sleepwalker standing over him, twisting and dodging as bolts slammed into the counter space and wall. He moved like quicksilver. Dropping down to one knee, the Sleepwalker hammered his fist into Secrist's nose and wrenched the sword from his hand, tossing it away. Secrist felt himself being lifted and then he was in the air, crashing headfirst against the far wall where he collapsed with a thump. It should have killed him.

Secrist bit deeply into the 'Root, sucking the juice down his throat to stave off the fits of pain from his crushed skull. Shouts and yells erupted from the Catpaw as the rest of the Kiran Thall attacked. Secrist struggled to open his eyes and then watched in horror as the Sleepwalker brought his men down, one by one. Bralt, Cremno, Dagger, and Tomn. They went down — just like that — with a whisper of death in the air. The Sleepwalker had a long, tapered blade of his own with an odd-shaped pommel, some strange design carved into it. It flashed against the glare of the lamps, spraying blood across the room. Another surprise, the knight appeared from the side hall, brandishing his double-handed blade. He struck at the Kiran Thall from the other side, slashing three before the others whirled and fled. Already the horsemen were retreating, howling in dismay, cowering before the strength of the Sleepwalker and the knight. The blades danced in the air, zigzagging here and there, leaving fallen soldiers in puddles of blood. Secrist stared at the Sleepwalker through half-lidded eyes, feeling his strength return and his thoughts cool into ice. The 'Root healed him. His broken nose fused back together, his smashed lip stopped throbbing. His skull fused whole again. Secrist didn't have enough 'Root left to keep going against the Sleepwalker alone. Not yet.

It was over.

The Sleepwalker stood silently over the dead Kiran Thall, looking for any movement of life. The knight had followed the fleeing men, determined to hack down as many as he could. *The bas-*

*tard!* Outside, the horses were galloping away, rushing down the street into the protection of the night. They had left him to die. *The banned cowards.* Secrist stared at the Sleepwalker through half-lidded eyes. *I'll kill you myself, you black-robed whoreson.*

\* \* \*

"It's over," Allavin Devers whispered in the blackness, appearing out of nowhere. Thealos eased the tension from his bow. The woodsman's boots didn't crunch in the scrub and pine needles. It was the softest stepwalking Thealos had observed in a human – except for Jaerod. He joined Thealos at the edge of their small camp nestled in the quiet of the Shadows Wood.

"Where are they?" Thealos whispered, resting the bow on the toe of his boot.

"Can't say for sure. But they scattered the Kiran Thall to the four winds, I can tell you that much." He clucked his tongue. "Ban, Jaerod is faster than any man I've seen. The knight is a howling fury himself. I'll keep watch for them. You should try and get some sleep."

Thealos patted Allavin's shoulder. "Sleep? After all this?" He rose and joined the rest of the camp. The moon barely penetrated the thick net of branches and needles. But down the slope of the hill, he could see a few of the glimmering lights from Castun. Thealos moved past the towering trunks and found Flent and Ticastasy grumbling in the dark.

"Here comes Thealos," Flent said, his sharp Drugaen eyes catching him in the shadows.

Thealos blushed, noticing that she had just finished changing into her traveling pants and boots. She shivered in a thin chemise and quickly tugged on her shirt, tucking it in. "Where's my cloak?" she asked, rubbing her arms.

Thealos saw it crumpled nearby and unfolded it before draping it over her shoulders. "I didn't mean to walk in on you," he said. "The gown you were wearing was pretty, but it would have only tangled you where we're going. Allavin is back. Talbin and the others at the Catpaw are safe."

"Good," she muttered, tugging the cloak about her. "But I was really looking forward to sleeping in that bed tonight. You should have seen the stuffed mattresses, Flent. Roye never would have paid for those."

"No he wouldn't have," Flent chuckled, rubbing his meaty hands together for warmth. He packed the gown into her traveling sack and cinched it closed. "Haven't had a good sleep since Sol. Hate, I sure miss the smell of the ocean."

"I don't mind the ocean, it's the bird droppings and dead fish I don't miss," Ticastasy quipped. She cocked her head. "What about you, Quickfellow? Wish you were home instead of down in the Shoreland like this?"

Thealos sighed. "I told you I miss my sister a lot...but this is where I'm supposed to be. I'm glad you were able to hear what Jaerod had to say tonight." He thought about the feeling of safety he had grown up with, believing that the Crimson Wolfsmen kept intruders out. But it was only illusion after all. Their defenses wouldn't work against a threat like this. "It's not easy being so far from home, is it?" He gave Flent a firm pat on the back. "You don't have to come with us," he said. "You could go back to Sol or head north to Dos-Aralon from here."

"What for?" Flent muttered. "There's nothing in Sol worth going back for. So Roye can yell at me and call me some stupid rash again?" He shook his head. "No, I don't think I'm ever going back there." He looked up at Thealos. "I would have died that night in Sol, if you hadn't healed me. I owe you for that, Shae." He paused then grinned. "What, thirty pieces or so? My life's gotta be worth about that."

"Ten and you're pushing it." Ticastasy gave the Drugaen an affectionate hug. She also looked up at Thealos, giving him a warm smile. "He's my best friend in all the world. That made you my friend when you saved him."

Thealos dropped to a low crouch, feeling his cheeks burn. "I haven't forgotten that both of you offered to help me in my time of need. I don't forget my friends either." He touched his hand to theirs. "If we make it through this, I promise you won't have to work in Sol ever again."

"A while ago, we used to talk about opening our own place," Ticastasy said. "What did we want to call it, Flent? The Ragged Staff? We decided be the owners, so we'd get to keep all the Aralonian pieces. Maybe we should open it up in Dos-Aralon, what do you say? After this foolish war is over. I'm...never going back to Sol either," she said with a hint of regret in her voice. She looked at Flent knowingly. He nodded and patted her hand.

Thealos stared at her in the darkness. He knew she couldn't see his face, and he was glad. She had lost her meager belongings leaving Sol. He felt responsible for that – for all of them. She was the first human – except Jaerod – who had stood up for him after leaving Avisahn. He owed her something.

"The Ragged Staff, is it? It'll be the nicest tavern in all the realm," Thealos promised, giving her shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Nicer than the Catpaw. Nicer than the Foxtale. I can get you a good price on Silvan wine."

"And Spider Ale?" Flent asked hungrily.

"You silly Drugaen," she laughed. "The Shae don't touch ale." She leaned back and rested her head against Flent's chest. "Maybe it won't be Dos-Aralon. Maybe we'll build it down here in Landmoor. Promise to visit us, Quickfellow?"

Thealos smiled and gave her a little hug. "Of course I will. I have plenty of Aralonian pieces Flent hasn't cheated from me yet." He butted Flent with his elbow. He envied their friendship and the years they had known each other. But it was something more. Maybe it was the fierce loyalty of friendship Ticastasy had for Flent. All his life he had struggled to make his own way, and he had struggled alone. Those he had grown up with had chosen callings like they were supposed to. He alone had defied the Shae hierarchy. He saw a little of that defiance in Ticastasy. He stared at her in the dim moonlight and felt a mixture of feelings, both tender and strong. Flent and Ticastasy were his only friends outside of Avisahn. His only real friends. Jaerod was a mentor, but he had motives Thealos couldn't begin to comprehend or relate to. These two accepted him the way he was.

*Or who they think me to be,* he thought darkly. A Silvan prince.

Glancing across the shadows of the camp, Thealos saw Justin watching him with a frown and a look of disgust. Thealos met Justin's disapproving stare and held it. "Try and get some sleep, both of you," he said to Flent and Ticastasy before moving away from them to join Justin.

Justin huddled in his dark robes, his features almost indistinguishable in the darkness. As Thealos drew near, he felt heat emanating from the other Shae and saw that he was comfortable in the coolness. The tiniest wisp of earth magic flavored the air. Justin's blue eyes glimmered in the dark.

*"You are too familiar with the human girl,"* Justin reproved.

*"I have not broken any of the Rules of Forbiddance,"* Thealos replied, dropping into a low crouch before the other. *"They are my friends. I deserve no reproach for that."*

Justin smirked contemptuously. *"The Drugaen is harmless. A child. He covets her friendship and nothing else. But the girl is dangerous. She cares for you, and you know that love between our races is Forbidden."*

*"You mistake her affection," Thealos countered. "There is another she has given her heart to. She wears his regard on a chain around her neck even now. But who I chose to make my friends isn't your business." He gave the other Shae a level look. "Now, I did not have time to translate everything Jaerod told us tonight. But you seemed to recognize some of what he said. You know of Sol-don-Orai?"*

Justin nodded. *"I've been there."*

His statement didn't startle Thealos. *"And the Everroot?"*

*"It was the cause of her destruction." Justin's eyes flashed with anger. "I do not trust the human who holds it. His loyalties are divided, I think. He prances and speaks like a Shae, but he is still a human to the core."*

Thealos frowned. *"Jaerod is the reason I am here. He wants to stop the sickness that plagued and destroyed the Empire. He doesn't want it to happen again here in this land."*

*"And are you Vannier, who can read the true intents of a man's heart?" Justin demanded mockingly. "How do you know he isn't using you for his own ends?"*

*"He isn't."*

*"But how do you know?"*

Thealos stared at Justin. *"I don't think..."*

*"It does not matter what you think," Justin interrupted. "You trust the humans – it is as obvious as lightning in a rainstorm. But I do not. I have known too many to ever trust them. They twist our ways and profane our gods. They mock us, my friend." He shook his head. "I am not a Banished One. I cannot abandon our heritage that easily."*

*"Is that what you think I've done?" Thealos challenged in a harsh whisper. "Abandoned our faith? To trust them? Do you know what has happened to the Shae since the days of Sol-don-Orai? Sweet Vannier, they have taken nearly the entire valley from us as a result of our 'trust'! The eastern river is the last boundary they haven't dared cross. The rest is theirs. We've been pushed and cramped up against the Ravenstone mountains where the bloody Drugaen have been fighting since I was born!" He noticed that Flent and Ticastasy were looking at him with concern. He calmed his voice, grateful they didn't speak Silvan. "I did not allow that to happen to our people. I am here because I believe the Sunedrion will finally involve itself in this war if they know what is happening down here. And if we get involved, we take back some of what was ours. The leader of the Bandit Rebellion is our enemy, not Sol-don-Orai, not Jaerod. The leader's name is Ballinaire and he has taken the Everroot, and he is using it without instruction on its dangers. That is Forbidden." He glared at Justin. "But I must have proof when I return to Avisahn. If I'm to convince them that the humans have found and are spoiling Everroot, I must have proof. They will not move without it."*

Justin leaned forward and gripped Thealos' arm. *"Then make me your proof! The records at Avisahn, they will tell me what I need to know – what I cannot remember because of my long sleep. The records of my watchpost are ruined. Everything has sunk and fallen into the bog. But they kept all the records in Avisahn, in Silverborne's palace." His eyes were eager, intense. "Come with me, Thealos. Come with me to Avisahn. Let us find the truth and tell the Sunedrion together. The witnesses of two Shae are worth more than all of these unbelievers combined."*

Thealos shook his head, frustrated. *"I can't." He rubbed his eyes, not wanting to explain about Nordain. If he went back without any evidence, he would spend the entire war in a Shae prison. "The only defense we have against the horrors of Sol-don-Orai is a Silvan artifact – the Silverkin Crystal. The Crystal is ours if we can get there first. Jaerod knows where it is..."*

*"He knows nothing."*

*"I know more than you think," the Sleepwalker said from the darkness, Allavin Devers in tow behind him. They joined the two Shae. Justin's eyes glittered like dagger tips.*



## XXIV

*"Speaking Silvan well does not make you a Shae," Justin mocked.*

*"I suppose it doesn't," Jaerod replied, sitting on the carpet of pine needles. "But not even Shenalle can make a human into a Shae. The best we can do is act like you. And try to do better," he added with a barb. Before Justin could rally a retort, the Sleepwalker raised his hand. "I was taught by the Shae. As was my friend here." He nodded to Allavin. Jaerod looked Justin in the eye. "I understand the source of your distrust, Warder. In your day, the Shae cowered here in the valley, praying that the Empire of Sol-don-Orai would leave them alone. It would have taken more than Warder Shae and Wolfsmen to call off the Empire's flying cities and you knew that back then."*

*Justin tensed. "I was there, human. Do not pretend to know what it was like."*

*Jaerod smirked. "Too many years asleep in the earth magic has its consequences, Warder. You don't remember as much as you wish you did. But the devastation that the Empire brought on itself was enough to cause your watchpost concern. Concern enough to seek the aid of the Mages of Safehome. When they grant the desires of the Shae, there is always a price. And the coin chosen is never the same. What do you remember of your Warding when the Mages chose you to defend it?"*

*Justin's mouth dipped into an angry curl, but he kept his temper wrapped up in his robes. "Why should I reveal anything to you?"*

*"Because I know more than you think I do. Maybe I can help you remember who you are."*

*Justin didn't look convinced. "I will say what I can, human. The Mages chose me for the Warding because of my youth and expertise in taming the earth magic. It was not certain how long the war in Sol-don-Orai would last. I protected the Everroot that was taken from Sol-don-Orai and planted here. To preserve and cultivate it that its magic would not be lost from this world. If the Warding was disturbed, I was to intervene."*

*Sturnin Goff appeared out of the darkness. He'd left his roan in Castun, but he was wearing his traveling armor, which was dented and spattered with blood. He nodded to them before nestling against a crooked cedar tree nearby.*

*The Sleepwalker nodded to him before turning to face Justin. "Do you remember when the Warding was breached?"*

*Justin shook his head no. "When I awoke, I was in the tunnels of my watchpost. Everything was in ruin. I thought that the Solarian war had already ended, that we had lost and the Warding had failed. But the humans I discovered in the tunnels did not speak Silvan or the tongue of the Empire. I came to realize that they were not Solarians at all. They were descendants with a garbled language. The watchpost hadn't fallen, it was abandoned, covered with earth, and being subsumed by the moors."*

*Jaerod rubbed his mouth. "What was your directive if the watchpost was to fall? Do you remember?"*

*The Warder Shae folded his arms. "I cannot tell you that. All I can say is that I am to seek the Heir of Quicksilver."*

*Thealos looked at Jaerod in confusion, and the Sleepwalker held up his hand to forestall any questions. "Why?" Jaerod asked.*

*"I...I can't tell you."*

*"Do you remember? It was part of the Warding," Jaerod insisted. "They were linked – the Everroot and the Silverkin Crystal. If the Warding was breached, the Crystal would call for help."*

*Justin looked disgusted that Jaerod knew so much. "Then I won't bother lying to you," he said*

archly. *"You are right. There is another magic in the tunnels. But it was Warded as well. Only the Heir can reach through this Warding. I do not know what the talisman is or how it was supposed to work."*

*"What did the Warding look like?"* Jaerod pressed.

*"The other Warding?"* Justin shifted and tugged his robes around himself. *"An Otsquare,"* he answered.

Allavin Devers whistled.

*"You know of an Otsquare?"* Justin demanded incredulously to the woodsman. *"By the gods, is nothing sacred in this era?"*

Allavin raised his hands defensively. *"I've seen the Otsquare, but I thought they were only found in the Riven Wood. They are Forbidden to humans. I do not know what they mean, but I know they are held sacred."*

Justin gave Jaerod a challenging look.

Jaerod replied with a calm smile, *"You are right, Allavin. An Otsquare forbids any human to pass. Not even a legion of Bandits can cross it. Not even a Sorian."*

The Warder Shae raised an eyebrow. *"So the Sorian are involved in this."*

Jaerod nodded. *"Two, this time. One you will remember from Sol-don-Orai. The Emperor's advisor."* Justin nodded in recognition. *"The other made her home with the Shae in the Kingshadow – Miestri of the Vale."*

Thealos shook his head, not understanding. *"Who are these Sorian?"*

Allavin rested his bow in his lap and rubbed his thumb along the riser. *"Jaerod just finished explaining to me about the Sorian I met in the Shadows Wood. The one that killed the Shae scouts I was with. The one I thought was a Sleepwalker."*

Jaerod gave Allavin a reassuring nod and joined the story. *"The Sorian were part of the original religious order when the Shae first came to this world. My order have been taught and trained by the Shae to counter and oppose their work. I must tell the rest in the king's common, Warder. They do not yet understand the enemies we are up against."*

Jaerod called Flent and Ticastasy over to join them. The knight was cleaning his blade with an oilcloth, but he listened as the Sleepwalker spoke. *"The Kiran Thall are fleeing, but some will flee to the army to warn them. That is unfortunate, but it doesn't change my plans. I was intending to go through the middle of their camp, not the edges, anyway."*

*"Why go through the middle?"* Ticastasy asked, confused.

*"It's the thinnest part of the line,"* Jaerod replied. *"I scouted to the east and west to see if there was a good point where we could slip through. If we tried to go around either side of the regiment, it would take days. And we do not have that long. The narrowest point, the least defended, is the center. Because no one would be so foolish to do what we will do."*

Sturnin Goff shrugged. *"What about the sentries? I'm sure there are Kiran Thall watching the road."*

*"I know where they are,"* Jaerod answered. *"Allavin and I will deal with them. The Bandit officers will be watching for us to slip around the army. They do not realize our goal or our intentions. The command pavilions in the center are their most vulnerable point. Before we continue south, I wanted to tell you more about the dangers we face in the Shadows Wood. Specifically, the dangers of the Sorian."*

Thealos looked at Ticastasy and Flent and saw the somberness in their eyes. Jaerod continued. *"The Sorian order has lived on this world for thousands of years. Since before the Shae came. They do not age – at least not noticeably – and they rarely die. This medallion I wear is of the order of*

Safehome. My work is to oppose the Sorian wherever I can. Their intentions have proven throughout history to be...very destructive. I am not the only one who wears this medallion, but there are only a few of us left, and many who were taught no longer remember why the order was founded. They use the skills and training for their own ends. You know them as Sleepwalkers, and so we share a reputation, not a cause. Let me explain what I told Allavin earlier. The Sorian involve themselves in the affairs of kingdoms and generals. They seek to control and manipulate crowns and principalities to increase their power." He looked at them seriously. "They do not do this directly themselves, but manipulate through others. As I mentioned, it was a Sorian who took a small trading nation and turned it into Sol don Orai. It was a Sorian who founded the Druid priesthood of Parath-Anatos. There is a Sorian who advises the Emperor of the Shieldlands to the north. And there is a Sorian who created the East Kingdoms."

"Why?" Sturnin asked. "If they are so powerful, why bother with underlings? I've never even heard the name before."

"You're from Owen Draw, Sturnin. You've heard of the Witch of the Vale, haven't you?" Sturnin nodded, understanding. "Rulers come and go, humans age and die – but the Sorian can only be killed by their own kind. The reason they don't become the kings and emperors is because of the attention they would get. They don't fear man or Shae, but facing an army would be foolhardy and come at great cost to their powers. In such a weakened condition, they can fall prey to other Sorian. It's a game they play amongst themselves. And empires have fallen because of it. My order has battled their influence since the beginning. And many of us have died for opposing them. The founders of my order were Shae." Thealos stared at him in disbelief. "But they trained those who were willing and prepared to carry on the fight. Some Drugaen were taught. Humans were also. My grandfather, father, and uncle were all part of this order. We have a deep respect for the ways of the Shae. But the Shae no longer involve themselves in the struggle as they once did. They have turned within themselves. They have forgotten why they came here."

Jaerod paused, looking from Thealos to each of them. "I have never taken the life of a Shae. This is how I convinced Allavin that I could be trusted. This is why he is choosing to come with us to Landmoor."

Allavin nodded. "Tell them the rest, Jaerod."

"What else?" Thealos demanded.

The Sleepwalker looked at them and sighed. "When I visited the Bandit camp earlier today, I discovered a Sorian there. Maybe there is another guarding the Everroot, too. What I mean to say is crossing the army will be more difficult than I first thought."

\* \* \*

Dappled sunlight poked through the web of tree-limbs and towering branches, bringing a surge of warmth to the new day. Thealos came awake when Jaerod passed through the camp, telling them that it was time to leave. A few hours of sleep was all they were given. But timing, Jaerod had said, was important. Thealos felt sluggish, but he roused himself, rolled up his blanket, and tugged on his boots. The rest of the group finished gathering their blankets and hurried down a quick meal before Jaerod broke away from Allavin to join them.

"You look weary this morning," Jaerod announced with a sad smile. "I wish I didn't have to tell you that sleep will be precious in the days ahead. Would that we could have stayed at the Catpaw for a night – your rest would have been better there." His gray eyes went to each of their

faces. "But we need to reach Landmoor quickly, before it falls, and there is a Bandit regiment and a Sorian blocking the way. Thealos and I can go on alone. You need not risk your lives. If you wish, Talbin will allow you to stay in Castun until we return."

He waited, but no one had changed their minds. Thealos was grateful. Flent and Ticastasy seemed nervous, but determined. Justin scowled, anxious to be on his way to Avisahn instead, but willing to postpone the journey until they had accomplished the task. But he had only promised to go with them in return for Thealos' word that they would bring the Crystal to the Shae once they'd claimed it. Sturnin studied Jaerod skeptically, and it was clear by his expression that he was still convinced that the fortress of Landmoor would hold for several weeks and determined to prove it.

"I've talked with Allavin and Sturnin, and we feel the least dangerous time to attempt to cross the army is at night. They will be watching for us, so it will not be easy – but I would rather try to slip through than fight my way through...if at all possible. If the Sorian decides to get involved, leave that to me." He gave them all a confident smile. "I know a few tricks the Shae scouts didn't. You are to go on without me if I'm delayed. Thealos' mission is the linchpin. He must get to Landmoor at all costs. He must claim the Silverkin Crystal and bring it safely out of there. Allavin, would you give the marching orders?"

The lean woodsman nodded and stepped forward. "The Iron Point Road is well-traveled and clear. Not many rough spots until we reach the Shoreland swamps. This half of the forest is dry and flat, but the southern half is jagged and wet. That's where it will be difficult, but it will also help us dodge the regiment and Kiran Thall. It will take at least two, maybe three days to cross the Shadows Wood. It's thicker to the east and west – that's why they cut a road here. Wide enough for an army to march. Jaerod asked me to scout ahead, to warn us of ambushes and approaching horsemen. Sturnin Goff will take the front, then Justin and Ticastasy. Flent will linger in the back, and Thealos, I want you to bring up the rear. You will help keep anything from sneaking up behind us. I always want a bowman in the front and the rear." He put his hands on his hips. "Good enough?"

"You are one of the best," Jaerod complimented. "Take the lead, Allavin."

Allavin smiled and went off ahead of them. His lean body had a long stride and puffs of dust came up from his boots. He moved quickly, in the Silvan stepwalking pattern.

A few moments later, Jaerod led them down a short embankment in the trees and onto the road. The Sleepwalker walked ahead of the rest. Thealos watched Ticastasy's hair bounce and Flent rub his ale-bleary eyes. Justin hugged his rustling robes. Sturnin looked menacing in his splotched armor, and Thealos was glad to have him in front.

Huge trees stretched their shadows across the Iron Point Road. A blanket of low-hanging clouds wore away by mid-morning, and only then the sun touched the road. The noontide sun bathed them with light for only a quarter-hour before the other wall of vine maple and cedar obstructed it. The Shadows Wood smelled of dust and cottonthistle, and there was scarcely a breeze. The road had been cleared of dense scrub and pine — just wide enough to permit wagons and travelers. Clumps of witch-thorn and wildflowers choked the sides of the road.

Thealos was lost in his thoughts as he walked. He remembered what Jaerod had told them that morning if the Sorian decided to confront them. *Leave that to me.* Thealos was impressed with his confidence, the way he accepted the danger and determined to face it anyway. Sleepwalkers had been killed by Sorian. Jaerod had intimated that much. But was this Sorian good enough to kill Jaerod? Thealos swore under his breath. He hoped to Keasorn not. In his mind, he remembered his last night in Avisahn when Nordain demanded that he choose a calling. Thealos now knew what he wanted most. He wanted to be a Sleepwalker. He wanted it more than anything. The benefit he

could be to the Shae – and especially to Laisha Silverborne as she assumed the throne when her father died. A Sleepwalker could go anywhere and not be seen – could face down Crimson Wolfsmen without weapons. Jaerod had scattered a group of Kiran Thall – nearly alone. It was Sturnin who had insisted on fighting alongside him. And hadn't Jaerod gone to Avisahn looking for someone like Thealos? Hadn't he said that they were more alike than Thealos realized?

He stared down the road at the Sleepwalker, amazed that he left no trail of bootprints to follow.

**To be continued in the October 2002 issue of *Deep Magic*...**

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