

The Grey Prince
Jim Casey

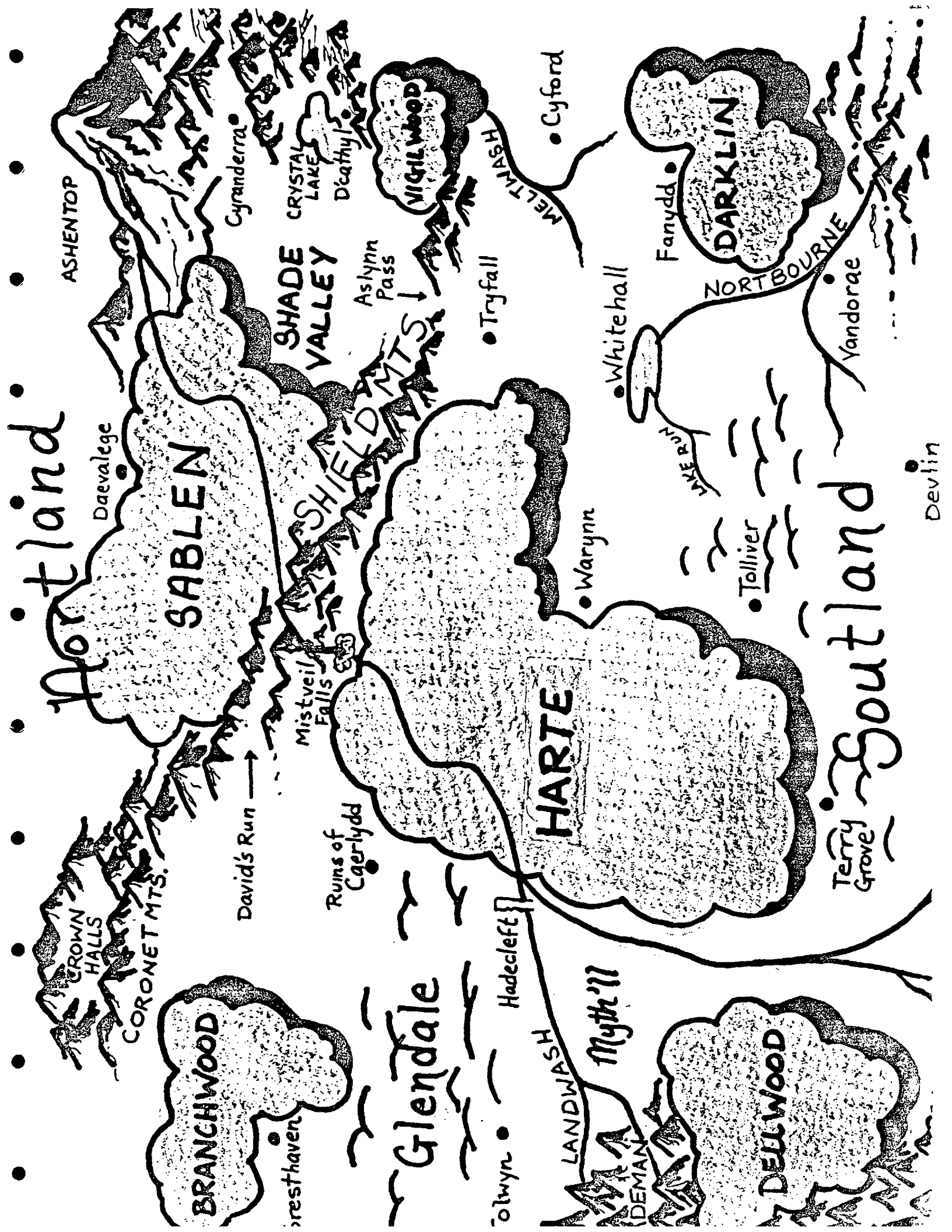
This project has been a tremendous growing experience for me as a writer. I am beginning to understand and appreciate more fully all the intricacies of the novel. A book really is an autonomous, growing entity. In your evaluation of my colloquium, please try to read the piece as if you were reading merely for enjoyment as I intend to publish the work if possible.

I welcome any and all types of criticism. Please tell me what you do not like even if you are not sure why it disturbs you. What I am hoping to gain from the evaluation is a feeling for which aspects of authorship I am succeeding at and which I am failing to achieve. Please comment especially on my use of plot, dialogue and character development.

My main focus has been to create a believable, multi-faceted world with its own history, mythology and peoples. I have experimented with different devices of style and have attempted some things that I do not think have been done before. However, I am not going to discuss such things here because I would like to hear your impressions of what I have done before I tell you what I am trying to do. Thank you for your time and enjoy!

The Grey Prince

Jim Casey



Northland

SABLEN

SHADE VALLEY

SHIELD MTS

HARTE

DARKLIN

Southland

BRANCHWOOD

Glendale

LANDWASH

Myth'll

DELLWOOD

ASHENTOP

Daevalege

Cyanderra

CRYSTAL LAKE

Deathly

VIGIL WOOD

Cyford

Tryfall

Aslynn Pass

Whitehall

Fanydd

NORTBOURNE

Yandorae

Devlin

Terry Grove

Warynn

Tolliver

Hadecliff

Olwyn

DEMANS

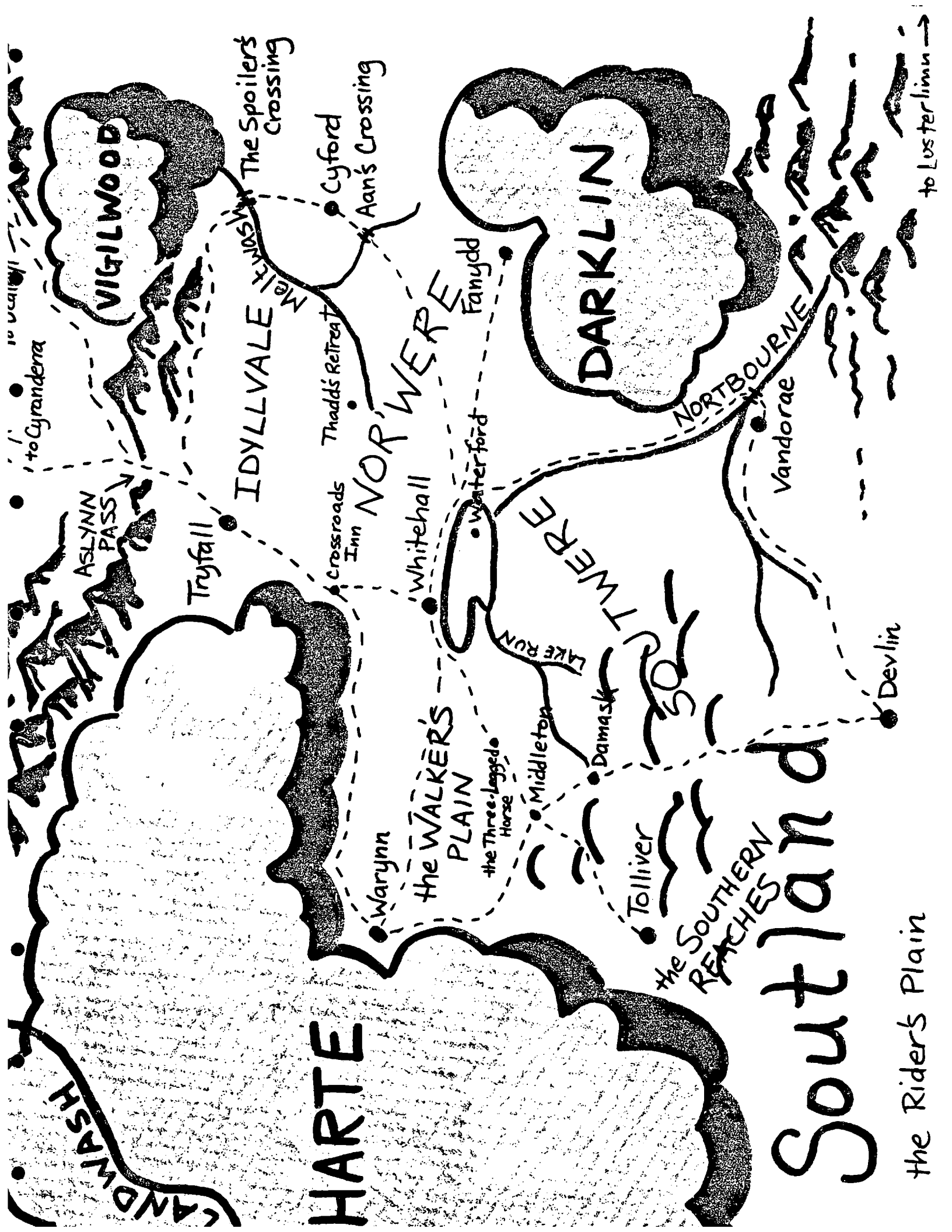
David's Run

Mistveil Falls

Ruins of Caerlydd

CROWN HALLS

CORONET MTS.



to Cyrandera

VIGILWOOD

IDYLLVALE

Cyford
Aan's Crossing

DARKLIN

NORTBOURNE

Vandorae

to Lusterlin

ASLYNN PASS

Tryfall

Crossroads Inn

NORWERE

Whitehall

Fanydd

Waterford

SOUTHWERE

LAKE RUN

Warynn

the WALKER'S PLAIN

the Three-legged Horse

Middleton

Damask

Tolliver

the SOUTHERN REACHES

Devlin

HARTE

Soutland

the Rider's Plain

*Poised between the Dark and the Light,
From the twilight that obscures the sense
The boy-king-without-a-kingdom returns
As the dusk, enigmatic Grey Prince.*

--from Farrel's The Wilderland

ONE

Gregory Herra descended the stairs cautiously. From the bottom of the stone-hewn steps an ominous and utterly silent blackness beckoned. Gregory never did like the dark. He pulled his russet cloak closer about him and peered into the darkness. There was a thin, rasping noise as he slid his sword from its scabbard. He advanced a couple of steps, descending with his sword before him like an ineffectual torch.

"Hello?" he whispered.

The night swallowed the sound. Above Gregory, the rest of the castle slept, unaware of his clandestine mission. He ran a hand through his short, blonde hair and raised his sword a little higher. He squinted.

"Oh for goodness sake! This is ridiculous," he told the darkness.

He sheathed his blade and glanced back up the stairwell. Cocking his head to one side, he listened carefully.

All he could hear was his own harsh breathing and the faint moan of the wind through the ruined corridors above him. He closed his eyes. Concentrating on his surroundings, he began to hum the melody to a Cyranderran lullaby. The song had put Jenny and little Dodder to sleep many a night and Gregory imagined that he was singing to them now. In the darkness, he could almost hear the low, husky voice of his wife, Denna, intertwining with his. He shook his head with a tiny, violent jerk and pushed Denna and the little ones from his thoughts. Why was this always harder for him than for Daryk?

Slowly, he raised a hand to shoulder height. The song abruptly ended and Gregory's head snapped back. His eyes popped open wide.

He stared, transfixed, as a small, blue spark ignited upon his wrist and travelled hungrily up to lick his fingertips. The steep, roughly cut stairwell sprang into view. Although more illuminating than any torch, the dancing flames offered no heat whatsoever and felt more like a fluttering bird in Gregory's grasp than the blue-fire he had created. No matter how many times he clutched the witchflame, he would never be comfortable with it. Fire without heat was unnatural. But then again, there were those who claimed he was unnatural.

The stairwell was in abhorrent repair. The stones were cracked and crumbling in several places, the walls had a light-blue mold stretching for the ceiling, and the sconces had been unceremoniously ripped from the walls. The air was thick and

*distinction
(to describe
from ?)*

heavy. Why Lleric had chosen this place, Gregory had no idea. He had not even known these halls existed.

Seven years ago, after the failure of the unified army's northern campaign, King Mardynn moved the court back to the great hall. He had planned to renovate this old section of Warynn, but the war effort had depleted the treasury and once he actually could find the funds to repair the old bastion, Mardynn's interest was otherwise occupied. Many said the old citadel was haunted. The close corridors emanated an eerie sentience. Reportedly, Mardynn moved the court because he was tormented by the ghost of his dead brother and king.

Of course, that was before Gregory's time. He had only been in Warynn two years. The day after tomorrow he would be gone. Denna and the children were already in Whitehall and in less than a fortnight, he would be with them.

A witchflame flared in the darkness below him, as if in answer to his own eerie fire. Gregory started, and his blue-fire sputtered a moment. He retreated two steps.

A dark figure solidified within the growing circle of light. The flame proffered a shifting, bluish tint to the man's features, producing a very unsettling, otherworldly effect. He was strikingly handsome, with grey eyes that shone in the light; slim, high cheekbones; and a thin-lipped, mocking smile.

That smile was broadening now.

"My, my, Gregory," he murmured softly. "A little nervous? You almost jumped out of your boots!"

Gregory chuckled ashamedly. He wondered how long he had stood there, staring foolishly into the blackness.

"Lleric, my friend," he bounded down the stairs to embrace the man. "You nearly frightened me to death." The corridor grew a little dimmer as he pounded Lleric carelessly on the back with the hand that held the witchflame. When he pulled away, there was no trace of the fire's contact with Lleric's clothing. Lleric smiled at some private joke.

"Perhaps I'm going mad," Lleric grinned. "But I could have sworn I heard someone singing."

Gregory blushed.

"That's how I surmount the edge. Daryk taught me the trick. That song is one of Jenny's favorites. Dodder likes the--"

"You weren't followed?"

"No." Gregory's eyes narrowed. "I do not think so."

"Good."

"Why so secret, Lleric?"

Lleric dismissed Gregory's question with a wave and began rummaging through his purse with his free hand. The corridor extended another twenty yards behind Lleric before ending at a door--presumably the door to the cellar itself. Shadows danced along the walls, and Gregory half expected the shadow-men to come to life and cry out, "Treachery!" and alert the resting castle to the meeting four levels below. Nervously, he cast about for spies and when he accepted a small vial from Lleric, he noted, with no shame, that he was trembling.

"Dragonrouge?" Gregory asked as he fingered the tiny decanter.

"Sorry, yet the finest Fanydd Red to be found."

"Ah," Gregory tipped the drink. "Here's to second-best."

The fluid sluiced warmly down his throat--not as strong nor as subtle as Dragonrouge, but then again, what was?

Lleric nodded with satisfaction at Gregory's appreciation of the rouge and motioned for him to finish the bottle. Gregory complied.

"Now," Lleric licked his lips. "What have you discovered?"

"Nothing good." Gregory rubbed his eyes. "Whoever is after us is mean. And informed. They say the assassins had witchbane, Lleric. *Witchbane!* Sand and scars, I swear I thought the stuff didn't exist, but Daryk says he has seen the poison himself. Been burned by it. By the Walker, I'm scared. If they know that much about us.... Damn, I'm dizzy. Shouldn't have downed the Red so fast."

"Go on. What else?"

"Well, Daryk thinks I'm in danger. It's no real secret here that I'm a Talisman. He's convinced that Richard is dead. Says he dreamt it. I swear, he has been having some terrible nightmares lately. Perhaps he's right. You know, I'll be gone day after tomorrow. Two days and I leave for Whitehall. He's bringing the princess there, too. Leaving tonight. Suppose he'll arrive well before me; I've business in--"

"Wait! Did you say tonight? Think, my friend. Are you sure? He was not to move until next week!"

Gregory pressed the flat of his hand against his temple. In his other hand, the *blue-flame* faded slightly.

"Oh, God! I don't feel so good, Lleric."

"Gregory, this is important. Is Daryk going to try and move Lady Farringdon tonight?" to

Gregory nodded, his eyes squeezed shut.

"But he was to arrive only yesterday and keep hidden. How will he convince her to go with him? Especially with his reputation around here. They have not met have they? King Mardynn will have him killed if he finds Daryk here."

Gregory's witchflame trembled, then eclipsed. He laughed weakly.

"Daryk said, 'If I have to throw her pretty little satined bottom over my shoulder, she's coming tonight!'"

"But the plan was for her to go willingly."

"The plan's been changed."

"Damn him!"

Gregory laughed again. The laugh evolved into a cough. Lleric saw, with some alarm, red spittle upon Gregory's lips. Taking his arm, he eased Gregory down to one of the steps.

"God, Lleric. What is happening?" Gregory's entire body shook violently as if he were freezing. Yet his skin was so hot to the touch, little tendrils of steam rose from his body.

Lleric took a deep breath and expelled it slowly.

"You've been poisoned."

Gregory opened his eyes and turned to face Lleric. Lleric

would not look at him.

"By you?"

"Yes."

"Why, my friend?"

Lleric winced at the word, *friend*.

"It became...necessary."

Gregory could no longer feel his arms or his legs. He wondered if he could run. He wondered if he could even stand.

"I don't understand, Lleric. Is it because I'm leaving Warynn. You know I never wanted to stay. It was supposed to just be temporary, you know that. Cedric and Baena didn't put you up to this--no, they wouldn't--I'm just so..."

He forced himself to be quiet. He was rambling pitifully. He hated it when he rambled. Lleric stroked his hair like he would a child's.

"Why--" he shuddered. "Why you? You are my friend."

Lleric smiled ruefully.

"That's why. I wouldn't let anyone else do it"

"What about Denna and the children? What about little Dodder?"

"I don't know."

"There's still time." Gregory grasped Lleric's shoulder weakly. "An antidote--"

"No."

"A healer, then--"

"No."

"Then for God's sake, take me to Daryk. He can--"

"No," Lleric answered softly, distractedly. "He cannot. You have been given witchbane, Gregory."

If possible, Gregory blanched further.

"You will not get better. There is no time. You will die." Gregory slumped against Lleric. "The witchbane takes about two hours to take full effect. In three, you will be dead. The death is a very painful one. In addition to all the physical pain you feel, you will begin to hallucinate and will think terrible things are invading your body. I'm sorry it must be this way, but it is--"

"Necessary?"

"Yes."

Gregory began to sob quietly.

"But I will never see Denna again."

"No."

"I won't be there for little Dodder's birthday."

"No."

"Please, Lleric--for the love of Aan."

"There is nothing I can do." Lleric's voice was husky.

"But I was supposed to leave day after--"

A spasm of pain rocked Gregory and he leaned back hard against Lleric. He grabbed Lleric's hand. When he spoke, his voice was a desperate, pleading whisper.

"Oh, Lleric! I never did...like pain...very much. I...don't think I can endure...much more of...this."

Lleric's visage twisted miserably.

"You need not."

Gregory did not see Lleric pull the stiletto from his boot. He did not hear Lleric's supplication for forgiveness. He did not even seem to feel the blade thrust into his soft innards. As his soul quit his body, a brilliant witchflame exploded about his head. And as the nimbus faded, so did Gregory Herra.

In the quiet isolation of the passageway, Lleric cradled his friend's empty body and wept. For Gregory, and for himself.

TWO

The blue moon wept softly over Myland. In the castle of Warynn, the final preparations for bed were being made. Outside, the rains fell--caressing the windows--oblivious to the problems of the kingdom. Within, sleep invaded the eyes and bodies of the citizens. Mothers were kissing their little ones goodnight; fathers were strangling the glowing torches goodnight. The people of Warynn were preparing for slumber. *diction*

Except for Princess Cassandra Farrington.

It was embarrassing, of course--and no one but Beth, her chambermaid, knew--but Princess Cassandra suffered from insomnia. Worse, she feared the night, and many times found it nearly unendurable. Every sound, every moan of the castle would raise the little hairs on the nape of her neck. Often, she imagined the shadows moved. The visits of her affliction were rare, but that did not make them any more bearable. What did, was reading. It was not uncommon for women to be able to read in Warynn; throughout the Circle Lands education and literacy were stressed, especially for royalty. Yet Princess Cassandra was not merely literate, but a scholar in her own right. Having access to the King's Library, she had already, at the tender age of seventeen, familiarized herself with the works of all the masters, completed DeCamon's *History of Myland*, perused the various political texts of the kingdoms and acquainted herself with as much art, music, and poetry as she could find. There were few in Warynn as knowledgeable in literary matters. For Princess Cassandra, tomes were her food, parchments her candy. She told herself that the sleepless nights were a blessing; a time for her to enjoy what she loved to do--learn. ✓

She did not believe it, but she told herself that anyway.

Outside her window the rain plummeted down, emptying the night's clouds. Rain usually put Cassandra straight to sleep, but not tonight. The princess had retired early, but after a few hours of tossing and turning, she abandoned her bed for the plush Jarric-crafted chair by the fire. She did not light any torches but rather employed the light of the fire and one well-used candle to read by. Lord Colwyn Michael from Whitehall had recently given her a splendid gift--a manuscript--which she pored over now. He had been courting her for several months and upon his last excursion to Warynn, he brought her the book. Not just any book, either. The text was an ancient manuscript penned by the elvish poet and king, Gaemes the Gentle, entitled, *Alandaerra Taht Salmile*--or in the common tongue, *A Soft Stroke from My Hand*. It was a copy actually,

and an incomplete collection, but even so it was very rare and valuable. Princess Cassandra wondered if it would be seemly to marry for such an exquisite gift. Her father had scoffed at the volume, for it was battered and torn. He could not understand that, to her, the book was infinitely more precious than any bauble or jewel. Then again, her father rarely understood anything about her.

For Cassandra, translating the text was fairly easy, but portions were undecipherable because the page had been damaged or ripped entirely out. Even as merely a copy, however, the work existed as, reputedly, one of only seven representations of Gaemes' poetry. "The Chronicles of Ffaliner and Gwindalyn", "Daedaly's Lay", "The Prothalamion", "The Tale of the Lost Color" and portion of the Archives were held frugally within. It was the first book she could truly call her own. And what a book it was!

Lord Michael was not only Commander of the Guard of Whitehall, but a Senior Watchman; he was also reported to be a close companion of one of the Savant Lords. He had an extensive library and was considered one of the most educated men in all of the Circles, certainly one of the most respected and cultured swordsmen ever. He was a quietly passionate man. He had a passion for God, and was inducted into the Watchmen at fifteen; he had a passion for wines, and had perhaps the most complete, envied cellar in all of Myland; he had a passion for knowledge, and read extensively on any subject he could; and he had a passion for Cassandra. A quiet passion, yes, but oftentimes quiet passions are the strongest. — *Authorial intervention*

Lord Michael had bequeathed the treasure to Cassandra undoubtedly after having a scribe copy it--or doing so himself, as Colwyn was infamously meticulous and distrusted anyone else's scholarly work--yet his copy would not have one hundredth the value of the edition he gave away. As a collector, he knew this, yet parted with the piece anyway--a gesture not lost on Cassandra. The duplicate Cassandra now owned had probably been completed by a Paladin, yet she was not sure. It was very likely that Lord Michael's own reproduction included a translation which he rendered himself; Cassandra looked forward to reading his interpretation of the great troubadour. His copy increased the number of manuscripts and transcripts of King Gaemes' work to eight. Cassandra wondered if the value of her own duplicate was in any way decreased by Colwyn's. If she were to obtain--

Cassandra's musings were disrupted by soft voices outside in the corridor.

Thunk!

What was that? Princess Cassandra sat up rigidly, poised. There had been rumors of late. Frightening rumors. One of her father's reports from Tryfall stated that the monsters--the Bogey--were appearing from out of Vigilwood. People believed that the monsters had taken Eanderthall the Paladin. Not that Cassandra believed in such nonsense as monsters, but--

Snick!

The door swung softly open.

A man swathed in dark cloaks slipped into the room, closed the

door behind him, and leaned back against it. Between two of his fingers he held a small, smooth stone. Raising it to his lips, he kissed it whimsically, then lowered it behind him to the lock and again Cassandra heard the soft *snick!* of the tumbler falling back into place and locking the door.

The man's outlandish dress was sodden and heavy and after he pocketed the stone, he unclasped his mantle and it slopped to the floor into the puddle it had created. The cloak removed, the enigmatic visitor was garbed entirely in grey tones. His loose tunic bore a mottled, somber shade; his leggings slightly lighter; his boots dark and crusted with wet mud. His attire was simple and austere and reminded Cassandra of the dangerous wanderers that sometimes frequented the castle. His demeanor was also severe.

He glanced at the fire and saw Princess Cassandra for the first time. His grim countenance broke into a sardonic smile.

"Hello, my lady," his voice was gentle and husky and its timbre both soothed and unsettled Cassandra at the same time. "I did not expect you to be awake at such an hour."

He shook his head wryly.

"Sand and Scars. Donal didn't tell me that you were so lovely. He always forgets to mention the important things. Ah well, my gorgeous little child, I have come for you."

Cassandra had not been afraid. The stranger's eyes had seemed so sensitive. Now a stark, cold fear gripped her heart. Yet she found she could not run. She could not even scream.

"No, please," she whispered tremulously. "Not again."

If she could yell, perhaps Beth, her chambermaid, would hear. No, it was still early for Beth. She would be down in the kitchen catching up on the day's gossip. Once again, there would be no one to help her. He approached her slowly, sinuously.

She could smell the sweet, musky mix of riding leathers, rain and sweat. He appeared confused at her reaction.

"Come now, Sweetheart," he cajoled. "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you."

He reached out to touch her face.

Suddenly, there was a cry at the door and shouts gathering in the corridor. The body of her guard must have been found. The Greyman turned and faced the door. Without looking to see if she obeyed, he ordered her to move away from the fireplace and into the corner.

From outside, Cassandra heard Dack, the beloved old guardsman yell, "Don't you fear, m'lady--we'll rescue you."

Something heavy smashed into the massive wooden door. The portal swelled back into the room, but did not succumb to the blow. Calmly, the Greyman unsheathed his blade and faced the entranceway. There was another collision and the door and its frame groaned together in protest--and held.

"If I die, promise me you will run." the Greyman muttered.

The princess did not respond. Once again the door rocked back from an incredible blast. Once more it held.

"Promise!"

"Run from what?" she cried indignantly.

He did not have the opportunity to answer her. Another shock pummeled the door and, almost as an afterthought, the frame collapsed and the entire structure fell inward.

Four burly guardsmen rushed in at once. The first met Death at the end of the Greyman's sword. The second quickly followed his comrade. The third bolted past the beleaguered intruder and sprinted straight for the princess. Yet as he passed, the Greyman hurled the body of the first guard into him, causing him to stumble. Another guard's blade descended upon the Greyman's head. At the last instant he parried and dispatched his adversary with a terrifying economy.

The Guard who had fallen, Cassandra saw, was Dack. She darted over to help him up but before she got to him he struggled to his feet of his own accord. Turning on her, he raised his huge Cyfordian blade. For a breathless instant she believed he meant to strike her down.

Then, without her knowing exactly how, the Greyman's body was between her and Dack's sword, receiving the blow. His hard form pressed against her, knocking her roughly to the floor. As she struck the unyielding stone, her arm twisted painfully beneath her. She heard the Greyman's sharp exhalation of breath and Dack's angry curse.

When she rolled over, the Greyman and Dack were circling each other. The Greyman had been sorely wounded by the slash he had received and Dack was obviously stalling, hoping for reinforcements. In less than ten seconds, the Greyman had slain three men. It was apparent that Dack did not want to be the fourth. The old, plush Jarric-crafted chair had toppled and fallen partially into the fireplace. Flames danced unholily up its fabric, twirling and leaping onto Cassandra's book.

The Greyman's wound was deep and blood coursed onto the floor from the gash. Yet the swordsman's face was impassive as he circled his opponent. The Greyman turned his back to the princess, keeping himself between Dack and Cassandra. She could not see what he was doing, except for the sweeping movements of his blade, yet she thought for a moment that he was singing.

Without warning, his sword erupted into flame. Dack yipped in surprise. The Greyman ran him through. When his body slumped to the floor, however, no marks had charred his clothing. The sword's fire died sullenly, leaving only the smoldering chair and crackling fireplace aflame.

The Greyman turned on Cassandra.

"Let's go." his voice was weak and gravelly, but his eyes were compelling. "Trust me. I'll not harm you."

She went.

* * * * *

Within a couple of moments, the entire castle was roused. Instead of proceeding down the stairwell, the Greyman led Princess Cassandra gently but firmly upwards. He labored up the spiral steps with his sword resting on his shoulder, pressed against his cheek. Even though he rushed her out of her room, they paused when they reached the north turret's second landing and the Greyman used the soft cloth attached to his scabbard to clean his blade with swift, fastidious strokes. He then sheathed his sword and led her upwards--his hand securely but not crushingly around her arm--towards the roof. They met no one. Halfway up the eleven flights the Greyman stopped.

"We...must...rest a moment," the swordsman gasped. He had lost a dangerous amount of blood. He sat Cassandra down two steps above him and gingerly slid down to a seated position, his back against the wall. He had taken the blade in the shoulder and the left side of his shirt, from the neck to below his belt, bore an angry crimson stain. His arm hung limp and useless at his side. It had been quite a trick to clean his blade with only one hand.

"You will not try to run."

"I do not believe you could stop me," the princess said softly.

He levelled his eyes on her.

"Try me."

She swallowed. He had just ruthlessly slain four good men. She took him seriously. The Greyman closed his eyes. She knew it would be stupid to try to escape now, so instead she studied him. He looked like a mercenary. He was vaguely handsome with long, tousled hair and a tanned face. His body was slim but firm. His powerful legs were those of a dancer, yet they trembled furiously now. His unkempt clothing was torn and ragged yet finely made. His brows were knit in pain but Cassandra had already noticed the man's eyes glimmering beneath them. They were dark--almost black--attentive and quick. Within them, the princess sensed a deep and ominous power. The Greyman's eye's had mesmerized her the moment he first turned on her. They burned coldly into her. She thought his eyes looked older than he did. They harnessed a profound intelligence and sensuousness. They made her uncomfortable. His small, full mouth grimaced tightly, tracing lines up his cheeks. His hands were broad and strong and his fingers moved indolently up and down the blade, caressing its sharpness. He appeared to be taking no notice of her but as she shifted he fixed her with his gaze.

"Do you know who I am?"

"No, m'lord." Cassandra answered formally.

"Do you understand what just transpired, Princess?"

"Yes," she responded bravely. "You murdered four noble men, one of whom I was dearly fond of. I do not know what you expect, sir, but my father--"

"No."

"What?"

"No," he repeated, as with a child. "I did not kill four

noble men. Perhaps three, but not four."

"What?" she asked again.

"Someone wants you dead, m'lady, and has hired an assassin to take care of it. You were to be silenced tonight."

Her eyes widened.

He smiled wryly.

"No, Cassie. Not I. Your guardsman, Dack."

She did not like the easy familiarity with which he addressed her.

"You are insane. Dack helped raise me. He has been a trusted servant since before my father became king. Why should Dack wish me dead? I have offered him nothing but kindness."

"He probably did not wish you dead--but his master did." Something about his tone chilled her. "As for me being insane, perhaps you are right."

He gestured to his wound.

"Cassie, this was for you."

"No." she shook her head. She remembered the fleeting image of Dack's Cyfordian blade descending upon her.

"You owe me your life, Princess."

Petulantly, she slapped the step. She pushed back her anger and began to list what she knew. Okay, the castle was roused; her father therefore was safe (or dead). The Greyman was alone. He had not harmed her yet. If he were telling the truth, she would have no clue as to who stalked her, so a confidant's loyalty would be as uncertain as a stranger's. He was willing to die for her. Correction: he was dying for her.

She decided to trust him.

"All right, damn it. I believe you--why, I don't know. Coming in here killing my servants and then saying I owe you my life? Great. Fine. Are you planning to collect soon? Should I be worried?"

He laughed ruefully and tried to rise. He did not make it. His feet betrayed him and he misstepped, tumbling head first down the stairs. The princess cried out and descended after him. As she reached him, she hesitated, then rolled him gently over. He was heavy.

His midnight eyes were dulled with pain.

"You believe me?" he asked doubtfully.

"I'm not sure, but I think I trust you, Aa help me!"

Cassandra pulled his long, curly hair off his shoulder and carefully ripped away his blood-slicked tunic to view his injury. Most of the bleeding had stopped but the skin around the wound had purpled hideously. Dack's blow had struck him upon the shoulder just beside the neck. It was deep. Cassandra thought she could see his collarbone sundered beneath the damage. The princess felt sick. She could not believe he had come this far. He would go no farther.

"I'll have to carry you." she stated.

"You're not strong enough."

"I'll have to be."

She slid her slim arm around his muscular body and tried to

lift him, to no avail. With an agonized groan, he pushed up and stood. She teetered under his weight but supported him. Slowly--oh, so slowly--they ascended. Every step was torture for the Greyman but he clenched his teeth and stifled every cry and moan. How much time had elapsed since they had fled her room, Cassandra was not sure. It seemed like hours but surely was no more than fifteen minutes. The gates would have been sealed by now and a castle-wide search would have begun. Soon the guards would investigate this turret. There was nowhere to go once they reached the roof. They would be found. *Why did he choose to flee to the roof?* Just her luck to be rescued from the jaws of death by an imbecile. Brave--but stupid.

He had better not die, she thought. She had too many questions to ask him. Who was trying to kill her? Why? To what end? Finally, she found the nerve to ask a question--perhaps a trivial one--but the one which pressed foremost against her lips.

"M'lord, how..." she stammered. "How did you make your sword come aflame as it did?"

She did not think he heard her, for it took him several moments and a few steps before he answered.

"A...simple enough trick. Minor magic."

"Then you are a wizard?" She was awed; Cassandra had never seen real magic before although she had read of it.

"No," he whispered.

"But you just said--"

"Lady, I am a Talisman."

A witchkin!

The Talismen were a people who possessed the power of magic. But, unlike the Erudite Stafflords of Whitehall, the Talismen needed no outside assistance to invoke their sorcery. No periapt, amulet, book of spells or staff was necessary for a Talisman to practice his necromancy. And, unlike the sources, he did not draw upon his own energy to create Talismanic magic. It was something inborn, innate. And unlimited. That scared people. Whereas the Magi were respected and venerated for their arcane knowledge, the Talismen were feared and hated. Ever since Cassandra was a child, she was told of all the atrocities the witchkin had performed and was taught to despise them. Yet did this man beside her truly eat children to retain his spontaneous, puissant sorcery; did he pray to the Spoiler every night and offer up mutilated virgins to Daemons? Was that why he wanted her? Surely not. And if he truly could use his magic upon her, he must know that she was no longer--oh, never mind. The princess refused to think on it.

"Why are you taking me to the roof, m'lord?" *There's no way down. No place to hide.*

"We are meeting friends."

I can imagine! Cassandra pictured a score of dreadful, scaled, fire-snorting dragons impatiently awaiting their dinner. She shook her head and redoubled her efforts, drawing his languid form upwards. From below, she heard movement and garbled voices a few flights down. The Greyman paused but said nothing. He turned urgently and climbed the steps with painful deliberation.

He laughed lightly.

"This was not the way it was supposed to happen," he mused softly. "I was supposed to carry you up to safety."

Cassandra smiled. It was amazing that this man could joke at such a time. He was about to die, yet he jested with her indulgently. Below, the deep, gruff voices were getting closer.

Finally, they reached the trap door to the roof. Princess Cassandra tried the latch. Locked. The Greyman reached into his pocket and withdrew the small stone Cassandra had noted when he first entered her room.

"A thynestone, Cassie," he explained.

Cassandra nodded wisely, having no idea what a thynestone might be.

He lifted it to the latch and twisted his wrist. *Slunk!* The bolt slid hollowly aside. He tried to lift the trap door, but could not. The Greyman slumped wearily to the floor. Cassandra felt up to where the stone married the wooden door; she pushed the heavy door up and open. Rainwater sloshed in, engulfing her. She had forgotten about the rain. The men a few levels down heard the clattering of the door and the splashing water and began running up the stairs.

Rough hands grabbed Cassandra from above and lifted her through the opening to the roof. She cried out in surprise. She heard a despairing voice moan, "Oh, Aan! He's hurt!"

A large bull of a man leapt into the stairwell and lifted the Greyman's body gently up. He jumped up to the roof himself and slammed the trap door down just as the guardsmen came into view. The bolt slammed home.

"Oh, Donal! Oh, look at all the blood, Donal!" The big man knelt down beside the Greyman. His massive hands twitched convulsively as if he were afraid to touch the wounded warrior's damaged body. With his left hand, he kept stroking his trim beard anxiously. The other man--Donal--calmly ran his hands over the trap door, murmuring something. Bright tears shone in his eyes. The rain had stopped and, except for their boots, both men were dry. The Greyman had passed out when he was lifted. His face was pallid and gaunt, his breath short. Both he and Cassandra were soaked from the rainwater, yet the bloodstains had not been washed from his clothes.

Muffled shouts pressed from beneath them. There were only the two men on the roof waiting for her and the Greyman; there sounded like a good dozen men below. Although both men had swords, they would not stand a chance. Donal seemed to be about forty-five. He was shaped vaguely like an egg. His mirthful face was drawn and tight. He looked soft. The other man's physique impressed Cassandra--but against a dozen men?

"So much for a quiet escape," Donal muttered. He turned to Cassandra. His face was broad and kind; his lip trembled. "Are you all right, Princess?"

"Yes," she breathed. Her shift clung to her and she wished she had had the foresight to grab a robe to cover her nightgown.

He nodded. Bending over the Greyman, Donal examined the

wound. After a moment, he appeared satisfied and rose.

"Hurry, Devin. Bring him to the *pass-door*. There may be enough time, yet! Hurry!"

Devin rubbed his eyes dry and gingerly hefted the Greyman. He cradled him like a child. Cassandra's own eyes blurred. She did not understand. Why were people trying to kill her? Why was this man willing to die for her? This man she had been taught to hate simply because of his magical birthright--how could he sacrifice himself for her? Shame welled up within her. She did not even know his name.

Donal and Devin had stopped before her. They were crowded into a small niche along the stones of the banner's foundation. Donal gestured for her to join them in the tiny space. She obeyed. He pulled her near to him and Devin closed in around her. On one side the softness of Donal pressed her and on the other, the cold firmness of the Greyman squeezed her. She had expected to find some concealed passage here that they would disappear into, but the men did not move.

"My princess," Donal addressed her seriously. "Have you ever passed before?"

"No." She had never even heard of such a thing.

"We are in a portal--a door if you will--between worlds. Manufactured of a magic that is lost to us now. This place will disappear in a moment--when I order it--and we will be in another castle far from here."

Cassandra thought she misunderstood. "How? We will fly?"

"No. We will not move, actually. But the universe will fold around us like a garment and deliver us safely to Tolliver." Cassandra's eyes widened. Tolliver was over forty leagues away! "Yes, m'lady. Tolliver. There are *pass-doors* throughout the Circle Lands. One per satellite kingdom and four in Whitehall. Few know of them. Listen to me, my dear, this is important. When we pass, you must hold on to us and not let go. Do not struggle. It may be frightening, so pray."

Princess Cassandra felt lightheaded.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," she whimpered, swallowing hard.

"Here we go."

She heard a crash as the trap door was forced open. Her vision began to tunnel. Deep within her breast she felt a tremendous pressure. Waves of near-nausea swept over her. She felt a hand grasp hers. It was the Greyman's. Bending to his ear she beseeched him.

"My lord, please. Your name?"

He squeezed her hand.

"Daryk," his voice was muted but distinct. "Daryk Frost."

She kissed his hand. *I thank you, Daryk Frost. Please do not die.*

The castle roof wavered before her. She suddenly felt that she would be sick. Then the stones beneath her feet leapt up and struck her in the face. She fell through them.

The guards of Warynn searched the entire roof but found no one.

THREE

Shannon Lore crushed the parchment angrily in his hand.

His echoing footsteps chased him down the wide, open, breezy corridor. Sunlight streamed through the tall, ornate windows to his right, coaxing the breezes in behind its rays. The palace of Whitehall was always breathtakingly beautiful, but--for once--the Magus did not notice.

They had really done it this time.

It was a brilliant stroke, actually. One he should have foreseen. But no, he had been sitting back, oblivious to the obvious, ignoring the imminent danger.

His lack of forethought annoyed him.

Shannon Lore was an ambitious man.

One day--one day soon--he planned to rule Whitehall. Unfortunately, there were others who had different plans. Diametrically opposed plans. He was a Stafflord, a member of the Council of Regents; a *channel*, and very powerful. More powerful than anyone knew--yet.

However, if he wasn't careful, the sly old fox was going to better him. Four months ago, Reynald had challenged Alric to a staff-tilt. The magical duel lasted nearly four hours, but, in the end, the old fox had ousted the even older council-head. Reynald had commanded the head of the Council ever since.

As time progressed, however, it became apparent that Alric Eldarman lost more than just his position of Master-regent that day. He was often seen wandering the grounds at night and, during the day, people reported seeing him conversing with the flowers in the royal garden. He forgot things and often called people by their wrong names, carrying on entire conversations with people about things which never happened, times which never existed. He recited poems endlessly, often misquoting key phrases, producing lines that would be quite humorous if they weren't so pathetic.

He could no longer do even simple magic.

That pained Shannon the most.

Of all the Magi in Myland, Alric Eldarman had been the one that Shannon had respected the most.

Respected? Sand and scars, he had *worshipped* him.

Alric Eldarman had been a magical impossibility. Magi were either *channels* or *sources*; Alric Eldarman was both! He was a Somatic Lord of unusual strength, yet he was also an *Erudite* Lord. He was amazing. He could call forth magic from a *tool* or incantation; or, if the need arose, he could tap the reservoir within himself. It was unheard of. Illogical.

The man had been an absolute genius.

Had been.

Now he was just a crazy old man.

And they were throwing him out.

Shannon pursed his lips. He didn't know what hurt worse: the fact that they were throwing Alric out or the fact that he had to agree with them. The old man had been his mentor--Aan, his father--for nearly twenty years. And now he was going to repay him by helping to remove him. By the Walker, Shannon Lore, what a nice man you are. His lip twisted in self-loathing.

I'll take care of you, old father, he promised.

Unfortunately, Shannon had troubles of his own right now. The Council of Regents was a delicately balanced governing body. Reynald had been tipping that balance in his favor for quite some time now; he had successfully stolen the seat of authority from poor old Alric, he had scared the others into accepting Barris Kall into the Council, and he had drawn Aryssa Farr to his side. If this move he was currently attempting came to fruition, he would not only tip the precarious balance, he would topple it. For a time, at least, Shannon would be politically paralyzed, completely ineffectual.

In one cunning act, Reynald Tym-Waltyr would secure his rule of Whitehall. It was a move Shannon longed to make, but it seemed the old fox was going to beat him to it. If it worked, no one would be able to touch him.

Not only did Reynald plan on excusing Alric--who had, at one time, been an important supporter of Shannon--but he had also found a way to dismiss the very man Shannon had been grooming to take Alric's place when the old man was asked to leave.

Shannon felt an obstinate, guilty conviction that this was some kind of bitter penance he had to serve for his unworthy conniving to supplant his old mentor.

Even worse. The way Reynald wanted to eliminate his candidate not only ensured that the man did not obtain a seat on the Council, it all but forced him to renounce any aspirations for the Craft whatsoever. If Reynald accomplished what he planned, no respectable hall would take him in as a competent Magus. Which was ludicrous.

The young man, whose name was Marc Todd, was the most promising young sorcerer Lore had ever seen. He was an Erudite Lord and could already do Master level channeling. However--and this was odd--he could do almost no Apprentice level work. It was literally too simple. It was like a master-swordsman who could generate marvelous composite attacks yet could not perform a simple thrust to save his life.

Shannon did not know if it was just a mental block or if it was simply some strange intrinsic attribute of Marc Todd's arcane abilities. He had heard of stranger quirks.

Regrettably, though, that quirk could cost Marc Todd all hope of becoming a Magus. That was a shame.

Shannon looked down at the piece of paper he had crushed in his hand. It was a summoning. He was to appear at the Sundering

in less than a week. Too little time. Most of his initial ire had subsided with his walk of the palace and he felt prepared to go talk to Marc now. He raised the parchment in front his lips and whispered cryptic phrases to it. The words melted off the page and trickled down between the flagstones beneath Shannon's feet. He then placed the scoured page on a servant's cart for disposal and turned toward Marc Todd's apartments.

That was when he heard the sobbing.

It was coming from the tiny chapel near the procession entrance to the grand hall. Prince Anthony had ordered its construction in honor of his dead father and brothers. It was the only one of his royal edicts that had been followed.

Discreetly, Shannon glanced inside.

Yes, there he was.

Anthony Edward Joseph Erindale. Lord of Nor'were, Prince of Whitehall, Soutland Protectorate and High King Pretender to the Throne of the Circle Lands.

At least in name.

In reality, he was a scared little boy who probably would not last the year out. He was the entire reason the Council of Regents existed in the first place. Or his father was.

His father, Thomin Allen Lestt Erindale, had been High King over the Circle Lands. Before he went off to provide his aid to the unified army, the king had lowered the Ascension crown upon the heads of his three eldest males: the twins, Garead and Gable, and Ashton. The twins had accompanied him to war and had died in the ruin of Forestwatch (now called D'Cathyl). The king himself had fallen earlier and with the twins passing, the Throne rightly dropped on the head of young Ashton. Except for one thing: the young prince had been thrown from a horse in a freak riding accident. He had died a week before news of the warriors' deaths reached Whitehall. That left Anthony as sole heir to the Throne of the Circle Lands.

But no prince could ever ascend to the Throne unless he had been crowned by the High King with the Ascension crown.

That was the law.

And it made sense. It kept all types of patricide and regicide to a minimum.

Anthony, by law, could not become High King until his father--who was dead--crowned him with the ceremonial crown. The man had not counted on Ashton, who was safe at home, dying as well as himself and the twins, so he had not bothered to crown Anthony. He did not think it would be necessary.

He had been wrong.

Of course, there was another chance. By law, the prince could also be crowned by the Paladin if the king was unable to perform the action (whether because of sickness, madness, death, or some other unforeseen circumstance).

Personally, Shannon thought the prince had more of a chance to see his dead father come back to crown him than the mythical warrior-priest.

At the same time of the death of Anthony's father and

brothers, the Paladin himself died. There had been no news of his successor and all had given up hope of that avenue for a solution to the young prince's--and indeed Whitehall's--problem.

A Council of Regents was formed to rule in the interregnum and assist in the education of the young prince. When it became apparent that the boy would never ascend the Throne, the body became regents only in theory. They were the kings of Whitehall.

Then, about five years ago, stories of the emergence of a new Paladin arose. He was called Eanderthall the White, or sometimes Eanderthall the Wise. Envoys were sent to locate the man but none ever seemed to reach him. Then finally, Lesley Tayne, Shannon Lore's own aide, returned to Whitehall with a message from the Paladin announcing his intention to visit Whitehall soon.

That had been nine months ago.

Shannon feared now that the Paladin was dead.

He feared that the prince, too, would be dead inside of two months. There had already been three attempts on the young man's life. There were many, many individuals who would rather not see the boy ever mount the ivory steps. The council Lore served on consisted of several such individuals.

The thought made his skin crawl.

The idea that he could be on the same governing body as the persons who were possibly, at this very moment, orchestrating the prince's assassination--

Shannon did not want to think about it.

He regarded the slumped shoulders of the sad young man with sympathy. He thought that he was probably looking at the loneliest boy in all of Myland. He may have been right.

He glanced at the awareness lamp and said a silent little prayer for the boy. Then he added one for Alric and Marc Todd. Then, as an afterthought, he added one for himself.

Then he continued on his way, his gait no longer a vengeful stride, but instead, a melancholy shuffle.

FOUR

"She is awake."

"Well, give her some of this." A woman's voice.

"Be gentle with her, please." Donal's voice.

"Donal, get me the volume on the desk, would you?" A voice very much like Donal's, yet softer, calmer, more commanding.

"Now?" Donal was upset.

"Before she forgets," the voice answered reasonably.

Someone pressed a goblet into her hands. She drank. The draught may have been the finest wine ever made. She quaffed the rouge greedily and stared sadly into the empty chalice when she had drained it. Slowly, she looked up.

"Greetings, m'lady," Donal bowed. "Are you all right?"

Cassandra nodded. She felt frightened but safe.

"What happened?"

"You have been asleep for two hours," a soft voice to Donal's left murmured. "No, m'lady, do not shake your head. It is true."

"When we came over, you passed out," Donal explained. "That is why it is called a *pass-door*."

Something was wrong.

Donal was attempting to make her smile. His determined but mirthless utilization of what was obviously an old joke made Cassie acutely uncomfortable. She felt tears pressing.

Donal stood facing her uncomfortably for a few seconds, then handed a thick, heavily bound book to a man on his left.

"I'll check on Daryk."

Daryk Frost.

Donal left her alone with a man and a woman. The man appeared to be approximately fifty years old, not quite six feet tall, from some station of nobility. He dressed simply but tastefully. He exhibited a solid frame of almost three hundred pounds yet moved lightly and gracefully. His hands moved deftly through the three tomes stacked across his meaty forearm. He was balding and his thin hair swayed in a wispy halo about his head. He had a full, snow-white beard that was neatly trimmed and fatherly looking. Although he was a giant of a man, his breathing was the only heavy thing about him.

The woman moved like him, yet with feminine elegance. Her eyes were as dark and intelligent as his and her complexion as smooth and dusky. Yet, unlike her companion, she enjoyed a narrow, slender frame. She was small-breasted and tall; almost as tall as he was. Her hands were smooth and soft, pressing gently against Cassandra's cheeks, forehead and wrists. When she spoke--which was

not very often--her voice sustained a quiet, personal music. Cassandra thought her very imperious and regal and felt like an awkward child within her care.

"How do you feel, my dear?" Music.

"Tired."

"You will. A *pass-door* drains you. The farther you travel, the more energy it takes. You have come a long way and are unused to *passing*. It becomes easier in time...not quite leisurely activity, but easier."

"Am I truly in Tolliver?"

The woman smiled at the timid query. "Truly."

"M'lady," the heavy-breathing giant interjected politely. "Forgive us our impudence. We live in an unfortunate age; sometimes we forget our manners. My name is Cedric Cross. I am a Stafflord of Tolliver. This beautiful young woman is my daughter, Carolyn. You have already met my brother Donal and our loyal friend, Devin Lattimore of Fanydd.

"The young warrior who brought you hence--or actually whom you carried hence--is known in Glendale as Faelyn Haesel-Tigth. Those of the Circle Lands know of him as Daryk Frost. Brother-stealer. Magic-wielder. Virgin-slayer. Child-eater."

He paused.

The princess merely nodded, "He told me who he was."

"You seem unimpressed. Most nobleladies faint straight away at the name Daryk Frost. Are you not afraid of him?"

"No," she lied. "He saved my life."

"That is not what they will say," Cedric warned. "They will say that he has taken you. Defiled you."

"That's not true!"

"I know," Cedric soothed. He shifted the ponderous volumes within his embrace. Softly, he remarked, "He is a good man. Few will ever know that."

"I do not understand," Cassandra fought to keep the tears back. She did not want to weep in front of the proud and refined nobles of Tolliver. "Why was I told such awful stories about him? And I believed them! Then he came to save me, risking his life--how did he know--and why would anyone want to kill me? And Dack. I trusted him, and then he..."

The princess remembered Dack's sword coming down to sunder her skull. If it had not been for the Greyman, the blade would have gorged itself with her blood.

"Oh, Aan!" she cried. "The Greyman. Is he all right?"

Cedric smiled almost imperceptively.

"The Greyman. He will like that." The big man settled down on the edge of the bed beside Cassandra, the three volumes still nestled in the crook of his arm. "He should be dead. He has suffered a grievous injury. The healer is with him now. But if he survives the night, it will be a miracle. We can do nothing for him."

Cassandra could hear the helpless anguish behind those words. The noble giant obviously did not see Daryk Frost as merely a "good man." Cassandra wondered what made the Greyman so special. She

recalled the weeping Devin upon the roof in Warynn and how Donal tried to hide his pain. This man was an outcast, an outlaw. What fealty did these people owe him. Why did they care about him so?

"As for your other questions..." Cedric continued slowly, methodically. "Why were you told the stories you were told? I may only speculate, for I know not the minds of those who told you; however, whenever a great man arises--and yes, I do believe Daryk to be a great man; but do not tell him that--whenever a great man arises, certain things almost invariably happen. At first, people will rally to him, for most men are essentially followers. After a while, the individual grows in power and becomes a threat to the established leaders. His failures are magnified, his accomplishments mocked, his name slandered. For a time, he lives in disgrace. Most men die there, their names cursed rather than praised. Yet a few lucky men rise again during their lifetimes to either infamy or renown. After they die, who knows? Strangely, people seem to forget the past. They allow the historians and the poets and the shapers to recreate the truth. We give *these men* a license to lie and thank them for it."

Cedric shook his head. Cassandra did not like the answer. For all the histories and poems and sagas she had read, not once had she questioned the author's veracity.

"How did he know?" Cedric mused, more affably. "By he, I suppose you mean Daryk. Well, how to answer? You probably already think him some terrible, forsaken necromancer."

Cedric stroked his snow-beard thoughtfully as he mulled over how best to answer. Carolyn sat down on the foot of the bed, settling her gown elegantly about her. Cassandra, no longer in the wet shift from Warynn but in a silky robe that was obviously Carolyn's, felt immensely inadequate in her presence.

"I suppose there is no way to tell it but to simply do so," Cedric took a deep breath. "Daryk dreamed it."

Silence.

"Cassandra," Carolyn's mellifluous voice interrupted. "Do you know what *scrying* is?"

Cassandra shook her head. *Daryk dreamed it.*

"Scrying is a way to glimpse the future. Through magic. It is a means to tell what has happened--in the future. The person who sees the future may not alter it, just as the person cannot alter the past. And, as with the past, the seer's perception of the future may be distorted by his personal schema or his vantage point. We believe that, somehow, Daryk saw the future in his dream of you. He knew that you were in trouble and that someone was going to attempt to kill you."

Daryk dreamed it.

Cedric patted her hand, "So we called together the--well, several concerned friends--and decided to do something."

"Actually," Carolyn pursed her lips. "Daryk decided to do something long before anyone discussed it. We merely agreed to try and help."

"A few of our number were as skeptical about Daryk's dreams as you are." Cedric added. "They opposed the decision. Luckily, they

held the minority."

Cassandra grimaced. *Our number* rung ominously in her ears.

"But," Cassandra protested. "Even if you were sure the dreams he had were to come to pass--why do anything? Why does it matter to you whether or not I live?"

"It mattered to Daryk," Cedric stated firmly.

"And to Donal," Carolyn added. "Daryk had never seen you, not even in his dream, but Donal had. It was right after the burial of the queen and her handmaidens." Cassandra flinched. Her mother and two servants had died by drowning. Sometimes she thought she should have died with them. "He had been invited to the funeral because he served as shaper to King Gammilyn. He told us, 'Even if the dream is false, the lady needs to be rescued.' That was, how long, five months ago?"

"Seven." Numbly, Cassandra realized that she grieved for her handmaiden, Susanna, more than she did for her mother.

"Yes, well," Cedric resumed. "As to why someone wants you dead, even Daryk could not answer that."

The thick door to the bedroom eased open and Devin entered. Sensing the eerie tension that permeated the room, he wisely retreated to the end of the bed, hiding behind a bedpost. Carolyn touched the back of his leg comfortingly. The household of Tolliver was strange to the princess, who was used to the cold aloofness of Warynn. Here, even strangers were greeted with warmth and caresses. Cassandra was not sure she liked it.

"Cassandra," Cedric cajoled. "I know that you are tired, but I need you to do something for me. I need you to look through these pages and tell me if any of these symbols look familiar to you. Especially, I need to know if any of the glyphs in these books were in your room. I suspect that one of these was probably somewhere in your private chambers. On a tapestry, perhaps."

Cassandra said nothing but curled her legs up beneath her. Cedric spread the three tomes that had been resting on his arm out across the mattress. Cedric indicated five pages in the first volume. The princess leafed through them and grunted negatively. Cedric closed the book and showed her two pages in the second book. Cassandra took more time, puzzling over a few glyphs, but again indicated that none looked familiar. Cedric placed the third tome closer to Cassandra and she laughed and pointed at one of the symbols.

"That one?" Cedric sounded alarmed.

"It looks like a butterfly!" the girl exclaimed.

"But...it was not in your room?"

"No."

Cedric let out a relieved sigh. Cassandra did not want to know what the magical symbol meant. She shuddered.

"You recognize none of these?"

"No, m'lord."

"Then how?" Cedric asked Carolyn. "It is impossible. Unless it were hidden. But somehow, somewhere, it had to be in her room. Otherwise, she would have stumbled--"

"It's not in her room."

Cedric turned to Devin, "What?"

Devin studied his boots, uncomfortable.

"It's not in her room," he repeated.

"How do you know, Devin? Where is it?"

"On her person," Devin blushed. "Your necklace, m'lady."

The princess pulled aside her robe, revealing a slim golden necklace with a finely crafted pendant. The pendant was a circle with a tear or raindrop suspended within it. Something had been *fleowed* around the circle but Cassandra could not read it; it appeared to be Old-Elvish. Yet, looking down to the pages open in front of her, Cassandra did not see such a symbol.

"But it is not here," she protested.

Devin reached across the bed and closed the book. Gilt across the cover of the book was a tear encircled by the same Old-Elvish symbols. Both the other two books were the same.

"Would that work?" Carolyn knit her brow.

"I don't see why not," Cedric was grinning, almost mischievously. "It would have prevented everything but the strongest of spells--such as a *pass-door*. Oh, that is so ingenious! What you are wearing, Cassandra, is a magical deterrent. It is used to protect things--such as important books--from magic. See how well-preserved these books are. No magic or natural deterioration may touch them. Let me guess: you have not been ill once while wearing this pendant."

It was true.

Cedric nodded.

"This is of a fey magic too abstruse for even me."

Cassandra looked down at the little tear dangling between her two pale breasts and then up at Devin. He blushed harder.

"The pendant appears to be very strong, but it has not permitted something very important to happen. Could you bear to part with it, Cassandra? Forever? It is very important."

She began to ask Cedric why it was so important that she give up the necklace, but changed her mind. The necklace had been given to her by her mother when she had been very young. Cassandra almost always wore it. It reminded her too much of used-to-bes. Suddenly, she no longer wanted it. Rising, she circumnavigated the bed and approached Devin. He would not look at her. She unclasped the necklace, stretched, and reclasped it around his neck. The blush deepened once more, but a timid smile fought to expand across Devin's face. She laughed, then felt guilty, remembering the Greyman was in the next room.

"Cassandra," Cedric said. "I think I may know why someone wants you dead. I *think*, but there is only one way for me to be certain. We are going to do a little experiment, but, in order for it to work, we are going to need your help. Do you understand?"

Cassandra felt like she was being patronized.

"Yes, I understand."

"Good," Cedric smiled. Carolyn left the bedroom and returned a moment later carrying a stick--thick as a walking staff but only about a foot long.

"With the pendant gone, this should work."

"Have you ever seen magic before, Cassandra?" Carolyn asked.

"Are we going to see magic now?" she asked expectantly.

"Yes, dear. Have you ever seen it before?"

"Only that of the Greyman--I mean Daryk Frost."

Witchkin magic!

"Well, Cassandra," Carolyn's dulcet voice promised. "Your first encounter with magic is almost invariably a frightening one. Yet magic is neither good nor evil. It is simply a tool. Do you understand?"

Cassandra wanted to ask if even witchkin magic were neutral, but instead said, "Yes, I understand."

"Good," Cedric had her sit on the edge of the bed and handed her the stick. It was of no ordinary wood. In fact, it appeared to be made of several types of wood smoothly welded into one sovereign substance. "Now, I want you to hold this up in your hand right there. Do not let it drop from eye-level, all right? In a moment I am going to use magic to make the stick catch on fire. But it will not come aflame on the outside. It will be on the inside; and there will be no heat. No heat. But there will be light. Light from the stick itself, not from any outside source, not a reflection, but a pure, blue-green light from the stick itself. Ready?"

Her eyes flicked to his.

"You are a Magi?"

"No."

He's a witchkin, too!

Cassandra suddenly realized that she was exposed, vulnerable. She no longer had the pendant to protect her from magic. The protection now hung around Devin's neck. *The enemy's neck?*

Although she tried to veil her eyes, Cedric saw her fear and apprehension. He sighed heavily.

"My little bird," he assuaged in a soft, placating voice. "If we wished you harm we could have imposed it upon you during your sleep after the pass-door. Why, if we mean to hurt you, would we go to all the trouble of saving you? The evil powers of the Talismen have been greatly exaggerated, believe me. Please, Cassandra, trust me."

Her gaze did not waver.

"Do it."

"Excellent," Cedric beamed. "Now, this is important. The very instant you see the inside of the wood begin to ignite, you tell me."

Cassandra nodded.

"Here we go. I am beginning now. Concentrate."

Nothing.

"Tell me the instant you see something."

Not even a glimmer.

"The very instant."

Just dull wood.

"It is about to begin..."

Funny, is it--?

"About to begin..."

It looks like--?

"About to..."

Yes!

"It's glowing!" she breathed.

it

Slowly the dim fire within the wood dilated until the entire surface was aflame. Yet there was no heat. *It* was as if Cassandra were grasping pure, unadulterated light. It was exhilarating.

"Now Cassandra let me tell you a few things about what you are holding. It is called a *glowstick*. It was made a long time ago by Talismen much more powerful than we are today. It may only be used by Talismen and was created to be used as a personal torch. It is much like what we call *blue-fire*, except the magic is externalized so that it takes almost no effort to create and maintain. It is very simple to work and used to be utilized as a tool for educating young Talismen. Oh, and Cassandra, one more thing."

"Yes," she answered, delighted with the toy.

"The *glowstick* is a haptic instrument. It may only be ignited by direct contact, by actually touching it."

"But," she whimpered. "I am the only one--"

Cedric nodded.

"Yes, m'lady. You are the only one touching the *glowstick*-- you are a Talisman!"

Cassandra cried out and dropped the *glowstick*.

It extinguished instantly.

FIVE

It wasn't stealing, exactly.

Permanent borrowing maybe?

They would never miss it. No doubt no one would even notice it was gone except for the way the sun had stained the window shelf lighter around where the thing had sat. She was doing the world a service, she told herself; liberating the object from its mundane prison upon the window sill and returning it to where it belonged--in the hands of an artist. Her hands.

But it's still stealing!

No! It's not. Relocating, her father would say.

It put a bad taste in her mouth to use his words; like accidentally rubbing your tongue against one of the thin sticks used to hold the sweets sold at a town faire. She grimaced, hearing her mother's familiar, bitter words in her mind...

You're going to turn out just like your father: a liar and a thief.

"Not a thief, exactly." she said, lying to herself.

"What's that, little princess?"

Ashley Rowe realized she had spoken aloud. Inwardly, she cursed herself vehemently. Outwardly, she gave her stunning red mane a shake and grinned in what she knew was a very engaging manner. She had been forced to prepare a face for the faces she met since she was just a child; there was no face less revealing or more manipulated in all the eastern lands--except for perhaps her father's.

"Sorry, Dylan." she said. "Daydreaming again."

He looked at her speculatively. She knew that he had heard what she had said.

"Fine," he chided her lightly, letting the matter drop. "Just don't let it happen again."

He was a good man. What he was doing with her father, Ashley had no idea.

That wasn't fair.

She didn't give her father enough credit, she knew. True, he wasn't the most honorable man in the world (*He is a thief!*), but there was something about him. Something that just made people want to trust him--which was probably why he was such a good thief; animals were invariably attracted to him; children loved him; good men followed him.

He was a natural leader.

A thief!

Yes, that too.

But there was that enigmatic *something* about him.

She knew that Dylan would die for her father. She also knew that he wasn't alone.

As a matter of fact, of all their company, she was probably the only one who wouldn't.

She loved him, yes. But she also hated him fervently. In many ways she beheld him with awe--if only for the way Fuzz followed him--but in other ways she loathed him.

Her mother had died over four years ago and she had been with her father ever since. She had seen more lands than most people three times her age. But she had not really had a place she could call home. She wanted that. Yet she knew that it was something she would never attain in her father's company.

That was why she was going to leave.

And because of what she had stolen!

Well, yes; and because of what she had stolen. That too. Perhaps it could buy her a home. If so, then it would be worth it. One small theft to avert a lifetime of them.

"He's back," Dylan motioned toward the door.

For a frightful second, Ashley thought he meant her father. But a tall, lanky man with shaggy grey hair stood silhouetted in the narrow entrance to the *Cloven Shield*. Aidain. His eyes seemed to pass right over them without seeing them, but she knew he had. He immediately turned and stepped from the tavern into the bright sunlight. For an instant, his jolly motley shone so brightly, that he looked to Ashley like an old jester who had put some furry pelt on his head to amuse his fat king. Then he was gone. Most of the people in the tavern had not even noticed him.

Ashley and Dylan sat in silence for a minute more. Two minutes. Three. Four. Ten. Finally, after almost fifteen minutes, Dylan rose.

"Time to go," he stretched.

"Why don't I meet you there?" Ashley asked quietly.

Dylan frowned.

"Why, little princess?"

"I have some things to do."

Dylan seemed about to protest. Ashley did not let him.

"If I'm not finished by the time we're supposed to leave, well, I'm sure you courageous men can manage without one small woman--exceptionally brave as she is. Besides, you know I never do anything until afterwards."

Dylan nodded. That was true. Her father had spotted a couple of targets coming out of the Soutland. They were staying at a nearby inn, traveling in a northeasterly direction. They had come to the inn under cover of darkness on exquisite mounts. They had not fraternized with the other guests at all, keeping mainly to themselves. Ashley's father had guessed that they were nobles heading to Whitehall for the Table Gathering, trying to remain inconspicuous. Ashley's father had a particular dislike for the system of government Whitehall now enjoyed and all but insisted that this particular party be hit.

Dylan knew how much Ashley hated these raids. More and more

often, she was finding an excuse to not be there when the raid would occur. And she was right, she wasn't really required to be there until the attack itself was over. It was her responsibility to sort through the saddlebags, purses, coffers--whatever, and divide the spoils into piles. Coins here; clothing there; jewels and baubles over there; and so on.

He smiled sympathetically.

"Take your time, little princess."

"Thanks," she said. She would miss this man..

"Shall I carry that for you?" he asked, picking up the worn satchel which contained her pilfered treasure. The top opened slightly and Dylan's glance snuck inside.

"No, thank you," Ashley deftly snatched up the pack. "I've got it. It's just a short walk anyway."

"Then allow me to escort you," Dylan offered as they made their way to the door.

"And be late? I'll not hear of it."

They stepped out of the *Cloven Shield* into the blinding sunlight. Looking up the bustling street, Dylan sighed resignedly.

"All right."

She perused the man's unremarkable face. Impulsively, she kissed his whiskered cheek affectionately.

"You know, Dylan," she said seriously. "You always were one of my favorites."

The thief chuckled.

"And you mine, little princess." He patted her bottom. "Run along, now."

She did, skipping like a child. She reached the top of the hill, turned and waved, and then was gone.

Disturbed, Dylan rubbed his chin.

What the Daemon was she doing with that old harp?

If she were going to steal something--which was unlike Ashley anyway--at least she could take something of value. The old instrument didn't even have strings!

Shaking his head, Dylan turned to go meet the girl's father. He promised himself that he would talk to her after this raid was done and see what was the matter.

Unfortunately, that was a promise he could never keep.

They never saw each other again.

SIX

Daryk Frost was in a dim, stone-hewn passage--a cave tunnel. He had been here before. Last night and the night before. And before that. Perhaps every night of his life he had been here. He continued down the passageway, because he was *supposed* to. He did not want to go. He knew where the tunnel led and he did not want to go there. He was afraid. He looked around and noted--with no surprise--that the walls had changed. The passageway had become a castle corridor with the torches in their sconces lighting the way. There were no doors, no alternate routes branching out from the hallway, no stairs, no windows. The place was deserted. The silence shouted insults at him and he could hear all kinds of monsters not moving nor breathing. Yet he knew that nothing was to happen to him. Not yet.

As always, a door was suddenly before him. As always, he had not seen it until he was right on top of it. As always, he wondered if it was the same or different. He could not remember. There was something he was missing, he was sure, but he could not place it.

Daryk tried the door.

Locked.

Relief flooded through him. Then, like some malevolent spirit, a thought flew into his brain:

What about the key?

What key? Daryk vaguely remembered something about a key. But that was many, many lives ago. It would open this door, yes, but it was meant for another door also. The same key could open either door. He wondered if they were really that different.

He fished through his purse and his hand closed about it. It seemed to throb dully. Sliding it into the keyhole he rotated it slowly. Tumblers flipped.

For every lock there is a key.

Daryk pushed open the heavy door. Heat struck him in the face. Blistering heat, yet heavy and familiar. Dumbly, he walked forward. He was in a small room, comfortably furnished. There was no fireplace but the heat was unbearable. Daryk looked to his left. His chest constricted.

Behind the cluttered desk hung an ornate tapestry: a Kom Moran. It was called the *Chained Wingdrake*. The tapestry's major was a blue and violet dragon--wings outstretched majestically--suspended between Homeland and earth. A golden chain around its neck pulled it towards the clouds while an obsidian chain around its ankle anchored it to the earth's heart. Three of its costae were broken

but it still strained against the chains. Howling Daemons circled it, piercing it with their spears and throwing rocks at it.

He knew the tapestry normally resided in Whitehall but he had seen it here, too. And if the tapestry is here, then that means--

Daryk realized where he was. He turned to run but somehow he could not find the door. Then, he was there. How foolish of Daryk to try to hide! He was always there; and would be until the end of time. No matter how he tried to avoid him, he would always find the Talisman. His sweet perfume choked Daryk.

But he was beautiful and Daryk could not stop staring at him. He was blonde, perfectly proportioned, strong and slim. He had grey-blue eyes that were bright and shining and, at the same time, deep and swallowed. His body seemed to have been chiseled out of a monolithic stone, yet it seemed too small for what it contained. When the man spoke, his voice was deep and resonant.

"Welcome home, my son."

He bent to kiss Daryk in welcome. The Grey Prince closed his eyes against the heat; when their lips touched, Daryk heard them sizzle. Yet he stood perfectly still. Perfume fondled his face, leaving a nauseating residue across his features.

"Thank you, Father," he heard himself say.

"Soon," he whispered, as if relinquishing a great secret. "Soon, you will come to me and I will give you your reward. I will stand before my people and tell them, 'Here is the greatest!'"

A sick longing rumbled in Daryk's stomach.

"You shall bow only to me and my father," he purred. "No man shall be your equal. No man!"

"Please--" Daryk moaned, weak with desire.

"You shall have any woman you wish; the lands shall be your playthings. Your name shall be unequalled; your power unfettered; your wisdom unlimited. At last, you can crush all those who hurt you, my son. Make them pay!"

"No, I--"

"Oh, we shall be quite a study in dusk!" he laughed, a horrible, maddening laugh. "My father, the Dark One; myself, the Shadowking; and you, our little Grey Prince! Oh, yes! How delicious!"

Wait a minute! Daryk fought against the oppressive heat, trying to regain control of his mental faculties. The Dark One was another name for the Adversary; Shadowking was another name for Perian Silvertongue; the Grey Prince was Daryk's own title. *And he's been calling me "son"--*

As if aware of his thoughts, Silvertongue looked at Daryk in a concerned, almost fatherly way.

"You've been ours all along, my child. Did you not know that? Oh, yes! You sold yourself to us long ago. Remember?"

Daryk didn't want to remember.

"No," he squeaked. "Never! Never!"

"We shall see," Perian Silvertongue promised. "We shall see. In the end, you shall be ours."

Abruptly, Daryk realized that the ledge he had been standing on was crumbling. He fell. He closed his eyes and waited for

impact. When none came, he opened his eyes. He was standing.

Trembling violently, he surveyed his surroundings.

He was in a beautiful forest, cool and deep.

Am I dreaming? he thought. He was--he somehow knew--in the land across the great sea. The land of the Walker.

He pinched himself.

It hurt!

And he knew he was dreaming, because he would never do something so stupid in real life.

And he remembered that here was where his dreams became lucid each night. But he couldn't remember what was supposed to happen next.

But he knew where he was. He had been here before. Just around that corner is where he would be. Daryk continued. He remembered that sometime in his past dream-life he had lived here, unaware of *him* or the other. He was afraid of the other--the one called Silvertongue--but at least he would talk to Daryk. And the presents he promised! They were wonderful.

But the Talisman would have given them all up for just a few words from *him*. Daryk rounded a turn and there he was!

He was ageless, neither handsome nor ugly, neither tall nor short. He was sitting atop a great rock formation, as he always did, lost in concentration.

He was called the Walker.

And yet, in Daryk's dreams, he did not walk.

For a time, Daryk stood motionless, revelling in the moment. He wanted to stay there forever, his eyes on the Walker, his feet on the Walker's land. His soul in the care of the One.

Then he felt the heat.

It was slight at first, a warm breeze, but then it grew. Sweat streamed down his back.

Fearfully, he turned.

And there was Silvertongue, advancing on him inexorably. The trees were aflame to either side of him and the land behind him charred and ruined. And Daryk knew that he had betrayed the Walker; he had led his enemy, Perian Silvertongue, to the land across the sea. Daryk screamed. He was the betrayer of the Walker! Desperately, he tried to warn the Walker of the Seeker's presence.

But the Walker did not hear.

It's just a dream! his mind bellowed.

It didn't matter. If the Dark One's masterservant gained purchase to the Walker's abode even here, then the land was lost. Silvertongue was getting closer. The heat choked Daryk.

He ran to the rock and began to climb. If he could reach the Walker before Silvertongue did, then perhaps he could warn him. Frantically, he mounted the cliff face. Rocks slipped through his fingers and out from under his feet. He would climb ten feet and then slide five. Blood spumed from his battered fingertips, making the rocks slick and sticky. He wept, for he knew he was not going to make it.

He could hear the rhythmic chant coming from the Seeker:

"Betrayer! Betrayer!" he sang. "In the end...in the end...you shall be ours!"

"No!," Daryk shrieked.

The heat beat down on him in palpable waves. He could feel the strength leaving his body.

Then the fiery hand closed on his ankle.

He fought and screamed and writhed. But he could not shake free. He was dragged down into molten blackness.

Down, down, down...

When he opened his eyes again, Silvertongue was gone, the blackness was not. But it was a cool darkness, not one of searing heat; and he could see in it, even though he knew that he would not be able to if he were awake.

His blistered ankle throbbed dully, but he tried to ignore it. Across the pitch black chamber laid a still figure. He was dead, a knife-wound decorating his belly.

Who is he, I wonder, Daryk thought.

The answer came, in that curious, certain way that answers come in dreams: *Gregory Herra.*

"No! Not Gregory!"

He ran to him, but before he reached him, the floor beneath his feet collapsed and he fell once again.

When he landed, he was in a forest once more. But it wasn't the forest of the Walker. It was murky, menacing.

It is only a dream, he insisted.

But he knew that was not true. He was seeing the present. Gregory was dead, he was sure. Lying in a deserted room somewhere, waiting to rot. He wanted to cry but couldn't.

This was real, too.

He was deep within some forest--either the Darklin, the Sablen, or Vigilwood by the look of it--disembodied and roaming freely. A smell of apprehension hung over the place. The entire woods were silent, awaiting *something.*

It didn't take long for Daryk to hear that something. Charging blindly through the trees was something large, heading straight for him.

The palisade of bushes before Daryk disintegrated and a man erupted past the bushy wall, running *through* Daryk so fast that he didn't even get a good look at him.

From his dress, Daryk surmised that he was from Tryfall. He had been carrying something on his back, but Daryk was unsure of what it was. The man had been tall and graceful, even running at breakneck speed. His face was determined--doomed--and vaguely familiar.

He had been running for his life.

But from what? Daryk wondered.

A few moments later his answer came. It moved so stealthily and quietly, that Daryk almost missed it. He saw it for just an instant before it walked through him but its image burned in his mind. Instinctively, he prayed for the man.

The monster was hunting him.

It was going to kill him.

It loomed in Daryk's dream: it stood about eight feet tall; fresh blood dripped from its fangs; its fur was dark and sleek; and its eyes glowed like a Bogey's; it could crawl or walk upright; its three claws extended...

SEVEN

"...like daggers! And the way it moves! Quick as a cat and strong as a warhorse! By the Walker, Morrigan! It was--"

"I saw it, Whittle."

"And the way it killed Jon and Roberson--"

"I saw it, Whittle."

"And--"

"Whittle."

The small man quieted down and began to worry at the makeshift bandage around his ribs, mumbling about eyes that looked like the mirrors of hell.

Morrigan Danlyn, Prince of Tryfall attempted to calmly assess his and Whittle's situation. They had just lost two men--half of their party--and were hiding in the dense underbrush of the Vigilwood trying to regain their wits and their courage.

Morrigan feared few things. He was perhaps the greatest swordsman in all of Myland, yet how does such skill avail one when his enemy attacks without warning, ripping out his throat before he can get a hand on his weapon? He shook his head wearily. When the beast first attacked, the monster went for Morrigan. Before Morrigan even saw it, the creature's teeth were piercing his gorget and penetrating his skin. Had he not been grabbed by some alien, atavistic instinct that told him to drop rather than to try to pull away, he would now be dead. Instead, he had fallen to his knees between the monster's legs. The creature's momentum and abnormal height had forced it to release its grip on the back of Morrigan's neck, spreading its legs wide to maintain its balance. Even as he struck the ground, Morrigan had swung upwards with all his might, connecting solidly, smashing into the softness between the horror's outstretched legs. The monster had grunted and looked down at him with narrowing eyes.

...eyes that looked like the mirrors of hell...

At that moment, Morrigan knew that he was going to die.

And he would have, too. But before the razor-sharp claws could descend into him, the diminutive Whittle had barreled into the massive beast. Morrigan had scuttled backwards out of danger. The nightmare had roared in rage and, with one swipe of its enormous paw, hurled the tiny man through the trees and down a steep embankment.

Before anyone could recover from their initial shock, the creature reached down and snatched up Roberson. The blue *cadrelief* had gotten his blade halfway out of his scabbard before the monster sank its fangs into his throat.

For the first time in his life, Morrigan Danlyn turned and ran. He had shouted for Jon to do so too, but the blue trecath was not so quick. His screams had erupted behind Morrigan and had given extra speed to the warrior's feet. Discovering the crumpled Whittle in the moonlight, he had not even paused to help the other man up. Instead, he had yanked him up over his shoulder and carried him through the woods. He had run until he collapsed, each moment expecting sharp teeth to rip into him, long claws to embrace him. When he fell, Whittle's body had crushed his face into the wet, musty ground.

Only now, several minutes after Whittle had dragged him into the underbrush, was he regaining his breath and his senses. Instinctively, he knew that the creature was a hunter. A tracker. It would find them, even in the semi-darkness of the moonlit night. They needed to get moving. But fear and exhaustion paralyzed him. His breathing and his heartbeat seemed obscenely loud. Whittle was mumbling the words to *Ffaliner* and *Gwindalyn* as he always did when agitated. Morrigan groaned inwardly. He hated the lay. It was an epic among the common folk; Morrigan thought it merely an annoying chant.

"The King of Elves sat upon his throne
And the doors were open wide
The feast was set, the guests were met,
When a human stepped inside.

"The rags on his body were sagging low
His blade was clove in two;
And yet his stride imparted pride
And his eyes were clear and true.

"O! Aan grant music to my words
And wisdom to my lay!
As I do tell what all befell
That man, I now do pray--"

Morrigan thought he heard a noise. He touched Whittle's arm. The small man quieted instantly, unsheathing a long, wicked-looking knife. Once again, Morrigan heard a slight rustle. He strained to hear more but only the breeze's gibberish answered his calling ears. His heart's explosions were so loud that he was certain that the beast that was stalking them not only knew their position but was slinking up under the thunderous cover of his heartbeat.

"What was that?" Whittle hissed.

Morrigan didn't think he had heard anything but he convinced himself that he had. Then he convinced himself that he hadn't. Then he heard it again.

Scrape. Scrape. Rustle-rustle.

The noise seemed to Morrigan peculiarly conscious. Regular. Predictable. Too obvious. Why could they hear the Stalker's movements now when before it was so agonizingly silent? He wanted to raise up. To stand above the low foliage and survey the area, inspect their surroundings. But he knew that if he did, their hiding place would most assuredly be revealed.

Perhaps that is what it wants.

Abruptly, the *scrape-rustling* stopped. Morrigan tensed expectantly. He imagined the sleek creature dropping through the canopy above them and mauling them before they could even react. He shivered. He decided that the *scrape-rustling* was better than the silence. Nervously, he eased his blade from its sheath.

Suddenly, the quiet forest erupted with movement. Branches snapped, leaves whipped, dirt scattered. It was charging straight at them. Morrigan could hear the low rumble of its breath. It was huge but fast. It crashed through the woods like a barrelling warhorse. Thirty yards. Twenty. Ten. Five...and beyond! The Stalker rocketed past the concealed warriors and continued through the bush until it was out of earshot.

Morrigan did not dare to even think about moving.

Ten seconds roared by.

Thirty.

Forty.

A minute.

Two.

Whittle exhaled. His body relaxed as if he were deflating as the air escaped his lips. Morrigan, too, drooped.

"It missed us," Whittle's voice quavered.

Ting!

Something bounced with metallic softness near Morrigan's booted foot. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Warily, he bent down to retrieve the fallen object. He gasped when he found it.

"What is it?" Whittle asked with terrified fascination.

"A ring," Morrigan answered. He held it up. It glinted, even in the darkness. "Roberson's ring."

"It's toying with us! Oh, Aan..."

Morrigan saw the panic and fear welling up in Whittle's eyes. He averted his own eyes and attempted to avert his own terror.

Think, Morrigan. Think! These are your woods, not that--that thing's! This is your home, your territory, your abode. Use that to your advantage. Don't let it spook you into doing something stupid. Think, damn it! Think!

He searched his internal map for any nearby animal traps that the Shield-roamers might have laid. None. He tried to think of any holes or crevices that they could lead the monster into. Not one. He tried to think of a way to trap the creature. Nothing. Finally, he cleared his mind and started over with his mind-map. The chances of killing the Stalker seemed virtually nonexistent, but perhaps they could escape alive and return to hunt another day. On their terms. And yet, Morrigan was not sure that they could

defeat the nightmare on any terms.

"It wants us to run," he told Whittle. "It wants us to panic and turn our backs on it."

"Well, I don't know about you, m'lord, but I am quite panicked already."

"Yes. Me too, dear friend. Me too."

Whittle feigned astonishment.

"The great daemon-slayer fears something? Alert the messengers! Next thing we know, the Lady Aamie of Clark will have a suitor! God save us!"

Morrigan smiled grimly. He wondered if God would save them.

"It wants us to run," he repeated. "Well, then. We will give it what it wants."

Whittle's brow furrowed.

"When I give the word," Morrigan advised. "Run for all you're worth. Keep those ugly little stub-legs moving, for I will not be looking back."

"Understood."

Resignedly then, they waited. Each patch of shadows enduring their painstaking scrutiny. Each sound pricking their ears. Each moment heightening the tension.

Something landed nearby with a heavy *thud!* Morrigan did not even bother to see what it was. Whittle did but wished he ~~did~~ not. *had*

"Now!" came Morrigan's half-strangled cry.

He bolted from his concealment, Whittle close behind. At first, he heard only the thunderclaps of his heart and the gusts of his breath, yet after a moment, he could discern the progress of another hulking mass through the trees about twenty yards to his right, running exactly parallel with him.

They were going to make it!

The thing was keeping pace with them but not moving to cut them off. As long as their legs held out...

The Stalker edged a little closer.

But they were still going to make it.

They had to. They *had* to. Morrigan wrenched his dagger from its sheath at his belt and hurled it in the direction of the Stalker. It missed. He threw a waterskin. A pouch of gold coins. Whatever small items he could throw without slowing his gait. He was not intent on hitting the monster, just making it think he was. Making it think that he was too scared to think.

They should have reached it by now. Morrigan began to worry. He could not even hear it.

Where is it? Where is it?

He chanced a look behind but nearly stumbled and fell.

The thing edged nearer.

Morrigan had nothing but his sword left to throw.

We have to make it!

If it came down to it, Morrigan wanted to die fighting.

He unbuckled his soft-leather sheath and tossed it into the darkness.

We're going to make it!

He could not tell if Whittle was still behind him.

The Stalker was less than ten yards away. He caught glimpses of its powerful, sinewy body through the forest growth.

In his mind, he chanted a hopeful, prayerful litany.

We're going to make it!

We're going to make it!

The Stalker was closing.

Closing.

There!

Morrigan spotted the ridge that he had been searching for. He concentrated on reaching that crest, bent his whole existence upon it. He no longer saw the Stalker; just the ridge.

Please, God. Don't let him get us now!

He reached the ridge and jumped.

Just where he had known it would be, a small stream appeared beneath him. Its water glistened in the moonlight.

But his recollection had not been perfect. As he plummeted through the air, Morrigan realized that his leap would fall short of the water. Flailing his arms in the air, he braced himself. Upon impact, he rolled, absorbing the ground's blow with his arm and shoulder. Behind him he heard a sharp crack! and a muffled cry of pain.

He whirled and leapt into the water. It was deep and swift. As he surfaced, he heard a splash. Turning, he saw Whittle emerge--coughing and sputtering--from underwater. He seemed to be in tremendous pain.

Back on the bank, a dark and lustrous form paced the shore. It dipped a paw into the water gingerly and then withdrew it.

A ululant howl pierced the night.

They had made it.

EIGHT

There was a soft knock at Denna's door. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she lifted herself up on one elbow. It was still dark outside, perhaps another two or three hours 'til dawn.

"Come in," she beckoned.

The door swung open silently and a small figure appeared silhouetted within its frame. Jenny.

When the little girl made no move to enter, Denna sat up in the bed and patted the empty half beside her.

"Come on."

Jenny was a good kid, but some nights she still needed to be able to climb in bed with her mother and rest securely (especially now, living in a new home). In all truthfulness, Denna relished those nights.

Jenny still tarried in the doorway.

"Jenny?"

"Mother--" She was crying. Jenny hated to cry; she thought it meant she was a baby.

"Jenny, what's the matter?"

The little girl erupted into the room as if she had been released by the giant force that had held her at the door. Likewise, her emotions erupted from deep within her, coming out in a blubbering, incoherent rush. For nearly a full two minutes the deluge poured over Denna until, at last, Jenny was spent. Her small, frail body shook violently against Denna's.

"All right," Denna soothed. "Tell me what happened. Did you have a nightmare, Jenny?"

"Yes. Well, no. Oh, I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

Jenny had stopped her bawling, but her breath was still ragged. She chewed at one of her fingernails determinedly.

"It was like a nightmare--I mean it was scary--"

"Stop that, Dear." Jenny dropped her hand absently. But much to Denna's consternation she was at the nail again only moments later.

"It was definitely scary enough!" she exclaimed. "But not dream-scary like the Troll-dream; it was real-scary. Like when you wish you can wake up but you can't because it's not a dream."

"But it was a dream, Sweetheart. And look--you've woken up! See, it's okay."

"No," Jenny's voice was alarmingly flat. "It wasn't a dream-dream. It was like the time I saw Dod fall out of the tree before he'd done it."

A year ago, Jenny had come running up to Denna screaming that she'd seen little Dodder fall out of a tree. But the toddler had not. He had been asleep as Jenny had. When the girl saw her baby brother soundly sleeping, she had sheepishly returned to bed herself. An hour later, Denna heard a crash outside. It had been Dodder. Somehow, he had awakened and hoisted himself up to the open window. What he had been after, only God knew, but he had fallen out the second story window. The trellis below had somehow broken his fall and he had survived the adventure with no more than a few bruises and a bloody chin. It had been a miracle.

Denna had forgotten entirely about Jenny's dream until the little girl had pointed to the tree beside the window and said, "See, I told you he fell out of a tree." Now, he had not actually fallen out of the tree, but to someone standing on the ground, it would have seemed that he had.

If that had been the only incident, Denna would have written the matter off as coincidence. But there had been more. Many more. Frightened, Denna told Gregory about the strange dreams. He had told her that it was not unheard of for some Talismen to dream things before they actually happened; although he had said that he had not heard of it happening in several decades. He had asked Daryk about it and Daryk had been quite intrigued. But rather than being worried about it, the Grey Prince had been excited about it. He said that there had been no recorded occurrence of *dream-scrying*--that was what he had called it--for nearly a century. The idea troubled Denna, but as much as Daryk annoyed her sometimes, she trusted him. After a while, she grew accustomed to Jenny's dreams.

Then Dodder started doing it.

Jenny was not a Talisman herself and she had problems understanding many things about her husband's heritage, but this was unbearable: he did not understand it himself.

The worst thing was, *they were never wrong.*

An accusing coldness crept into her heart.

"Come on, Sweetheart. It's all right. What did you dream."

She thought that Jenny hadn't heard her. But then in a small, portentous voice, Jenny answered:

"Daddy's dead."

NINE

Cassie drained her goblet. The sweet rouge sated her tongue ^{taste?} and warmed her belly. Although it was late, she found herself unable to fall asleep. Insomnia, her ever-faithful friend, had decided to visit her again tonight. It was just as well. Lately, her nights had been plagued by nightmares. A cloaked figure--shrouded in deep green robes--would beckon to her in her sleep. Its eyes glowed eerily; its voice whispered seductively. It carried a staff of ash within its gnarled grasp. It scared her beyond measure.

She didn't want to meet it tonight.

Leaving her chambers, she slid quietly down the hall, dressed only in her shift against the coolness. She came to the door she wanted--one she had become quite familiar with--and pushed. The door swung back silently on its hinges. She stepped into the room and shuffled to the end of the large bed.

Snuggled beneath protective blankets slept the Talisman, Daryk Frost. She looked down at him. His long hair dripped down over his shoulders, framing his sturdy face. His small, full lips were slightly open and deep, slow breaths escaped them. His eyes were shut and light bruises appeared around them. He had the beginnings of a beard lining his chin and seemed to be regaining some color. She watched him fondly. He was very handsome when asleep. Of course, she thought, he was very handsome when awake also.

She checked the dressing on the Greyman's wound and adjusted it minutely. Amadis, the Devlin Healer had been able to keep the wound from getting infected, but the hurt was deep. Cassandra wasn't sure he would make it. No one was.

She pulled the blankets close over him to keep him warm. The night was getting cooler as the sun ran farther and farther away from Tolliver. Outside, the blue-ice moon gazed sternly down at her through the window. She could hear the complaints of the wind through the trees and bushes.

Sitting down on the bed beside Daryk, Princess Cassandra pulled out a copy of Heniad's *Fey Lexicon*. She was lucky, she decided; at least she had been brought into a place where books and parchments were readily available. Into a home where knowledge and learning were revered.

She was still unsure about the witchkin magic, but she wasn't afraid of it anymore. If someone like her could perform it, then she was certain that it was mostly harmless. At least that's what she told herself.

Reaching down, she held the Greyman's hand and stroked it.

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"It's all right, m'lord. You're going to make it. I know you are. Don't be afraid, I'm here."

She wasn't sure if she were trying to comfort him or herself, but she felt safer beside him, so she stayed there. Her candle burned slowly down until it finally guttered and went out.

For a long time, she sat there in the darkness, peering into the night, holding the hand of Daryk Frost.

* * * * *

Morrigan emptied the skin. The water refreshed his throat and rejuvenated his mind. He knew he would need to be well-rested for tomorrow's journey, yet he couldn't sleep. He supposed it didn't really matter though. He had been having terrible dreams for several days. A dark figure--carrying an axe and wearing full mail and helm--would invade his dreams and yell for him. His warcries rent Morrigan, his screams chilled him.

He didn't want to have to war with him tonight.

Morrigan abandoned his treetop watch and slid down the limbs to the ground. He passed through the trees and underbrush silently and came to an oddly shaped stump--a landmark he had become quickly thankful for--and slipped down the slope beyond it. He eased through a line of flora into a clearing.

Wreathed in the glow of a small campfire slept his wounded companion, Whittle. He looked down at him. The small man's brows were furrowed, even in sleep. His moustache shivered slightly with each breath. His fine, foppish clothes had been all but ruined by their leap into the lake, yet his Vandoraean hat had escaped the encounter with no damages. He studied the little man affectionately; he was his finest friend.

Morrigan adjusted the bandages a little, cutting new strips for his ribs and tightening the brace around the tiny man's leg. Whittle had snapped the shin clean in two when he landed just short of the water trying to escape the Stalker. Morrigan wasn't sure if the vivacious little comic would ever walk again, but he would have guessed he would--Whittle was bone tough.

The Tryfallian prince pulled the blanket up around his friend. It was going to get even colder just before dawn. He didn't want to have to worry about Whittle getting ill from the weather, too. He stared up at the indifferent moon and listened to the song of the breeze. The music of the spheres sang silently to him and he listened contentedly.

Easing down next to his friend, he pulled out a worn map of the surrounding woods. They were lucky, he guessed; at least they were in an area he knew well. They could continue travelling down the stream until it met the Meltwash and ride the currents right

out of the Vigilwood. Of course, that would dump them leagues south of Tryfall and Morrigan was unsure of just how long the Stalker would follow them. The river was swift--much faster than man or beast--and he was certain that the Stalker could not possibly catch up with them as long as they stayed with the waters. At least that's what he told himself.

He patted the shoulder of his diminutive friend.

"It's going to be all right, my friend. We're going to be fine, just wait. Don't worry, I'm here. I'm here."

Slowly, the fire ate itself away to embers.

But long after the fire had fallen asleep, Morrigan Danlyn, eyes glittering in the darkness, listened to the silence and guarded his friend against the night.

TEN

Daddy's dead.

Denna shook her head in denial. It could not be true.

Suddenly the air felt uncomfortably close. A hot flash passed over Denna and then settled into a cool numbness.

The worst thing was that they were never wrong.

No, not this time. She was wrong this time. Gregory was just about to leave Warynn and return to Whitehall for good. He could not be dead. He would never be able to see how she had prepared their new home.

A crazy image of Gregory's hands kept jumping into her mind. She loved his hands; they were soft and strong and sensual. In her mind, she kept seeing those hands twitching in the nervous way they did whenever he held *blue-fire*. Except the agile hands could not seem to light the witchflame for more than a few seconds. Each time the flame fizzled, she would notice the peculiar way the eerie light's counterglow framed his simple wedding ring. Then the illusion would be gone.

She longed to hold those hands to her, but she couldn't because--

Daddy's dead.

No, because he's not here. That's all. That was what she had been thinking: she can't hold his hand because he's not here. Not because he's dead; he isn't.

"Mommy?"

Dodder stood at the door looking at Jenny uncertainly. Her tears always made him cry too.

Jenny stanchd the flow of her emotions and sniffed bravely.

"Come on in Dod, it's okay," she tried to sound reassuring for her baby brother.

The three year old wandered into the bedroom and eventually arrived at the bed. His wispy blonde hair was tousled and tangled, sticking up in a vaguely comical fashion. He had traversed the room in an aimless, sulky manner and now stood, mouth slack, at the foot of the bed.

"Mommy--" he over-articulated, talking to her as he often did: staring fixedly at a spot two feet away from him and not looking at her.

"Yes, baby."

"Where's Daddy?"

She groaned inwardly at the question.

"He's still in Warynn, Sweetheart."

Daddy's dead.

Dodder frowned at this.

"No, he isn't."

Denna gave Jenny one of her stern now-look-what-you've-done frowns and for good measure added a you've-gone-and-frightened-your-baby-brother eyebrow raise.

"Dodder, honey. How long have you been listening, baby? Daddy is still in Warynn, that's all. Nothing has happened to him."

Dod just stared two feet ahead.

"I can't see him," he complained in a petulant voice.

"Of course you can. Just as soon as he gets back--"

"No," Dod pouted. "I can always see him when he goes away. He comes to me when I'm asleep and reads me stories."

"I'd forgotten about that," Jenny said in a small voice.

"What?" There was a rock in the pit of Denna's stomach.

"That used to happen to me too," Jenny murmured. "I guess I grew out of it."

"Well, that's probably all that happened to you, Dodder. You have just grown out of those dreams."

To Denna, her words sounded false.

Dod shuddered, "Instead of Daddy, the bad man came tonight. He didn't read me stories."

At last, he looked at Denna. He was trembling.

"I don't wanna go back to sleep, Mommy. He'll be there. He had scary eyes. He wants to eat me. He was bad. Scary eyes. Don't let him eat me, Mommy."

"Oh, Baby!"

She swept him up into the bed and the three clung to each other and wept. Slowly, the crying died down and Denna's weak reassurances faded off. But they would not let go of each other. They still hugged desperately.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, Baby."

"The bad man said that Daddy was dyinged. What does 'dyinged' mean?"

An ugly chill squeezed up Denna's spine.

Daddy's dead.

"That means he's going to be going away from us for a little while...maybe," she ended lamely.

"Oh," Dod said, sounding unsatisfied with the answer.

How do you explain death to a three-year-old child? If Daddy's dead--which he isn't--then you won't be able to see him ever again, Dodder; not until you die and see him in the Homeland (and that's only if there really is a loving God, that is, and if my Gregory dies, then that just proves that there isn't a God--at least not a loving one).

How do you say something like that to a three year old?

You don't.

She squeezed her children, feeling a fierce instinctual need to protect them. Tomorrow, she would ask Shannon to send his aid, Lesley, to check on Gregory. She began to softly sing to the little ones. That usually put them right to sleep. She had a

feeling she would not sleep tonight, but she hoped that they could. Earlier, she had told the children that everything was going to be all right. She had a sickening intuition that it wasn't. Not for a long time. Dad's and Jenny's fragile frames pressed against her warmly. Their breathing slowed and after a while, Denna stopped singing.

She had just decided that maybe they would sleep all right tonight when Dad's clear, drowsy voice piped up.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, Baby."

"Will Daddy come back to us when he's finished dying?"

"I don't know, Baby. I just don't know."

ELEVEN

"So how many does that bring us to?" the old, grandmotherly woman asked sadly.

"Twelve Talismen dead," the young woman answered her. "And a few hollows, also. It's possible that they are merely coincidental, but--I don't think anyone really believes that."

"No," the old woman agreed thoughtfully.

Cedric surveyed the small, cozy room. The faces that filled it were troubled. Faces that he had come to know well through the past years; faces that seemed to have run out of answers.

After Erindale's death and the formation of the Council of Regents, Cedric had found no more reason for him to remain in Whitehall. He had returned to his home city of Tolliver and taken part in the local government there. Because he was a Bloodlord, he was offered a role in the management of Tolliver, and because he had once served as the High King's advisor, his opinion was highly respected. A few years after he had left Whitehall, Baena Eldarman had approached him and told him that she had left her position as Master-regent of the boy-king because she felt that the Council was "getting too big for their robes." She told Cedric that she was interested in meeting with him and a few others intermittently to discuss the state of the realm.

"Nothing so sinister as a secret group," she had said. "Just some friends gathering together to talk about what needs to be done in the Circle Lands. Perhaps to watch after those less interested in the rest of the land."

Cedric had agreed and the two of them sat down to choose the other members of their group. They decided to select one individual from each of the kingdoms who would be familiar with the workings of their kingdom's governing body but not its slave. Most of the people they chose were friends or respected colleagues; all had reputations for integrity and a love of all the land.

Cedric noted with no real remorse that they had formed a secret group. They told no one of their meetings--not even their families--and only rarely let anyone know that they were even acquainted with each other. There had only been a few occasions when circumstances had actually warranted any type of action on their part, and even then they had only advised. Cedric thought that might be about to change.

As usual, it had been Baena who called the group together to her home in the north of Nor'were, the idyllic retreat called Thadd's Sanctuary, and she stood now beneath the old Flavian tapestry commandingly.

The woman was dressed in a comfortable-looking robe of deepest blue. She held an all-but-forgotten glass of rouge in her delicate left hand. She had a soft, matronly quality about her and a generous, empathetic face. One might have believed that she was simply a harmless old woman, too, if it weren't for her eyes. Of sparkling blue, keen and alert, they casually caught everything around her, narrowing with perception. Yet however unsettling her sharp glance and even sharper intelligence might have been, her genuinely concerned and amiable nature easily won the hearts of many a visitor.

The woman was nearing ninety, but still insisted on looking after her estate herself (even to the point of demanding to be allowed to do the menial tasks normally assigned to her household's servants), and she was still one of the most powerful Maguses Cedric had ever seen. He had nothing but the greatest respect and affection for her, as did they all.

To her right, wearing the bright colors and somber expression so typical of Vandorae, sat Burke Reyman, that city's Chancellor. His thin form rested in a Jarric-crafted chair that appeared to be much too large for him. His raven hair and midnight eyes starkly contrasted the gaiety of his raiment. He was a reliable man and one of the original members of the group. Serious, thoughtful, insightful and diplomatic, he had impressed Cedric time and again with his constancy. He was a very private man, and Cedric had objected to him originally because he had mistaken the man's melancholy character for moroseness. It had taken a while before Cedric had felt comfortable with the man and his sardonic wit, but now he had no regrets about taking him as the representative for Vandorae.

Beside him on the floor sat Melissa Tomasyn, the healer from Tryfall. Her hair was light--which was unusual for a citizen of Tryfall--a strawberry-blonde hue. She was neither beautiful nor ugly, a plain-faced young woman bubbling with humor. She was refreshingly simple. Not unintelligent. Simple. Cedric loved her eyes. He could tell her mood by the color of them. Right now, they were the somber green of concentration.

Next to her on the floor reclined one of the two new members of the private group: Harper Rackley. He had replaced old Gillam, the craftsman from Fanydd. Harper was the assistant to the Mastershaper himself, and had provided invaluable information about the reclusive society of the guildsmen. He was privy to the same information that Farrel saw and seemed to take pride in accurately reporting it to the group. He was an enthusiastic young man--at nineteen being the youngest present--who spoke his mind freely (even when his mind had not decided exactly what it thought). His youthful tenacity and unabashed openness endeared him to the entire group, and Cedric would have wagered that he wasn't the only one who had to fight the urge to ruffle the young man's tousled auburn hair each time he spoke. The youth had a musical voice even when he was just talking and Cedric found it a delightful treat when he would grace their meetings with a ballad.

Beside him, taking up half of the room's small couch, sat the

other addition to the company. As a matter of fact, she had been suggested by Harper, himself. Her name was Stacey Donne, and she was the only true nobility among them. Her uncle was the king of Devlin, her father, next in line for the throne. She had dark, impossibly thick hair that fell to her waist in a free mass of sensuous curls. Her eyes were deep brown, her nose regally aquiline. Cedric remembered wondering if skin so smooth and lovely was reserved for princesses and his daughter. He smiled. She was a welcome contributor, even if she sometimes did steal the young Harper's concentration away every now and again. ^{rep.}

She was also one of the four Talisman in the group, so the possibility that someone might be systematically killing members of the mysterious race especially disturbed her.

Next to her sat one of Cedric's favorite people in the entire world: William Le-Valle. He was from Cyford; a senior Watchman. Although his chiseled, angular features made him look very young, the man was almost fifty. Yet he was in excellent physical condition for any age. He had a close-cropped, military cut that accentuated the strong head; his eyes were grey but warm; his smile wide and easy. He was the only one in the room who wore a weapon besides the ornamental court-daggers. On his back was strapped a wide Cyfordian blade in an austere sheath.

He had served with the Watchmen for most of his life and ranked quite high among them. Cedric had been surprised to find that he had so much love and admiration for the man. Usually, he found soldiers of the Watch to be closed-minded, judgmental, mindless pests who could not think for themselves. They had been so indoctrinated by the rhetoric of their leaders that he could often tell that a man was a Watchman within the first few words of a conversation--long before he was told or saw the Valorbelt--because the man's idiolect would be exactly the same as any other Watchman's.

But Le-Valle was different. He had no doubts about his faith and had served the soldiers well. But he could think. God, could he think! Most of the time, no one knew what he thought because he seldom spoke, but when he did, people listened. He was incredibly unassuming and the most polite and courteous man Cedric had ever met.

Between Le-Valle and Cedric, holding up the wall near the door, sulked a tall man of ageless good-looks. His high cheekbones and thin lips denoted a noble heritage and his downy blonde hair suggested a Fanyddian or Cyfordian birthright.

Lleric Ashe. White Noble. Assistant to the Master-regent of Whitehall. Talisman.

He was always the first to volunteer for any difficult or tedious work that needed to be done. Cedric had never once heard him complain. He was a meticulous man, excessively conscientious. He was a perfectionist and did not want to do anything without the proper preparation. He loved horses and respected any man who cared for his mount correctly. Usually, his mouth was twisted in a sarcastic smile, waiting for the opportunity to unleash a modicum of his ironic wisdom. His grey-blue eyes usually twinkled

mischievously.

But not today.

Today he was tormented by inner Daemons and his eyes were dead, his face haggard. Cedric knew why. He studied the poignantly empty chair that he was leaning on; the chair that should have held the last of their number; the chair that should have sat Gregory Herra of Warynn.

"Coincidental?" Baena mused, breaking his reverie. "No, I do not believe that. However, I cannot understand how such a diverse crowd could be targeted like that. Who could initiate such wide-scale assassinations? The attacks have been so different--from maulings to poisonings--that we must assume that the individual assassins are unaffiliated with each other. Does that mean that they are not directed by the same force? I do not know, but I believe we must find out."

"Wait a minute," Harper said. "What exactly do you mean by unaffiliated?"

Burke Reyman answered for Baena.

"She means that the attacks appear to be unrelated. We know that even a Talisman using *pass-doors* could not have possibly committed all the murders. A couple of them occurred within an hour of each other. The style was different in many cases; and 'style' is something that is important to most assassins. We know that it is not an individual and we think it is not a group. Because of all the different circumstances involved, it seems implausible that the animal and the other assassins were sent by the same person."

Harper scoffed, "It seems implausible that an animal was sent to kill someone at all!"

"One man and three Talismen have been mangled by some sort of animal," Baena said. "What kind, we're not sure. However, the marks are quite distinctive."

"In the same general area?" Le-Valle suggested hopefully.

Reyman shook his head.

"One south of Tolliver, two in the Harte near Warynn, one all the way out by Cyford!"

Le-Valle gritted his teeth and sucked air through them.

Baena resumed, "The last attack involved poison but the one before that--the attack on Cassandra Farrington--involved betrayal and a conspiracy."

"We're not sure that the other guards were in league with the man, Dack," Cedric interrupted.

"Yes, that is true," Baena said. "It is interesting to juxtapose the attacks: some appear in public, some in deserted areas; some are violent deaths, some quiet deaths; some by what appears to be a group, some by what appears to be an individual; some by animals, some by men; some target men, some target Talismen. What is the connection?"

"Political?" Stacey asked.

"Doubtful. Two of the victims were slaves. However, three were minor nobility and four were merchants. Two were guildsmen, one a Magi. Three were travellers of some sort."

"Mmmmm, taking a bite out of everyone," Harper observed. "Literally."

Melissa frowned and punched him lightly.

"So what are our options?" Le-Valle asked.

"Wait around until it happens again," Burke observed dryly.

"What we really need to do is figure out why it's happening," Cedric said. "We have little hope of stopping them if we don't know who the assassins' target is or where they plan to strike next."

"Assuming we actually do do something," Stacey muttered.

"Why wouldn't we?" Harper asked.

She explained, "What right do we have to act--justly or unjustly--outside our own households? Is it our responsibility to take or are we simply puffing ourselves up with our sense of self-importance? I mean, if any one of us had gone to King Farrington and told him that there was going to be an attempt on his daughter's life, do you really think he would have believed us? What proof did we have? The word of the man he despises most in all the world!"

"Which brings us to the question--just how did Daryk know about the attempt?" Harper asked.

Cedric did not want to answer that question. He had seen the reaction the answer had evoked in Cassandra.

"Can we get back to task?" Baena saved him. "We can discuss all these things later. I'd like to finish giving all of you the general setting before we decide anything! We need to know all the information that may apply before we can decide our course of action. There are already fifteen people dead and we--"

"Sixteen."

"What?" Everyone turned. It was the first time Lleric had entered in on their conversation since he had arrived.

"What do you mean Lleric?"

He raised his pain-filled eyes.

"Gregory's dead."

Varying degrees of shock and disbelief rocked the room. Tears leapt into Melissa's eyes. Harper hit the floor with his fist, muttering mild oaths and weak denials. Baena and Le-Valle cried, "How?" Only Cedric nodded his head.

"I know," he said.

Something like fear entered Lleric's face.

He whirled.

"How," he croaked.

Cedric stroked his snow beard, looking down at his feet.

"Daryk talks in his sleep."

It took a moment for the statement to sink in. Cedric looked up. He saw disbelief on Harper's face, disgust on Reyman's, confusion on Le-Valle's and open contempt on Lleric's.

"You mean he's *dreaming* again?" Lleric made the word sound obscene. "Oh, please! If it weren't for Daryk and his damned dreams, Gregory might still be alive today!"

"Maybe," Cedric returned with his most placating, reasonable voice. "But the Princess would most definitely be dead."

"Well, excellent! Just what the realm needs--another snotty, selfish royal brat! How could I have ever even thought about such an insignificant little peon as Gregory? I mean when compared to someone as important as a third rate kingdom's little girl--well!"

His words were spoken in anger and everyone present forgave them. They all knew that Gregory had been Lleric's closest friend ever since they were boys.

Harper's low vow cut through the tense, quiet room: "If I ever find out who did it, I shall send the bastard straight to hell!"

Lleric barked a staccato, mirthless laugh.

"He's already there," he said softly.

"What do you mean?"

To Cedric, Lleric looked like a child who had just been caught stealing pies off of window sills. He stammered a moment before really answering.

"Well...um...he's dead, too."

"How?"

"I suppose Gregory slew him," Lleric snapped. Then more thoughtfully, "Or perhaps he killed himself. I don't know! I disposed of the bodies so no one would ask too many questions. I don't want to talk about it!" He wheeled on Cedric. "You said that you heard Daryk say that Gregory is dead."

"Yes, Lleric--"

"Then he lives? The Grey Prince lives? I had heard that he was injured sorely."

Cedric tried to gather his thoughts. Lleric was acting very strangely. Probably the loss. A grief-stricken man often forgets who he is. Still, Cedric felt as if he had just missed something important. He fought to recapture it, to reevaluate it. Stacey had been about to ask a question. She seemed to realize that her mouth was gaping open and popped it closed. That made Cedric lose the last vestiges of the thought he was trying so vainly to retain.

"Yes, Daryk lives."

Once again, Lleric seemed frightened.

"What has he said?"

"Nothing."

"Does he know who the assassin is?"

"Lleric," Cedric sighed. "He has been unconscious for over two weeks now. I believe he will live, but nothing is certain. I don't know what he sees in his dreams. Maybe he knows, but I doubt it. The last time, he was very vague. He simply knew that Princess Cassandra needed rescued. No reason why, no mention of who was after her, nothing. I remember that he had to ask Donal about her; he didn't even know what she looked like. If he knew more, he was keeping it to himself."

"Why didn't he wait until he was supposed to take her?" Lleric complained. "That was stupid."

"It was necessary," Cedric replied. "According to our original plan, Daryk was going to attempt to convince Cassandra to come with him of her own volition. If she declined, then we were to post inconspicuous guards to watch over her. But then Daryk had another of his dreams. He passed to Warynn and spoke to Gregory

about the best way to reach the princess and then returned home. We made the necessary preparations and returned to Warynn that night. Unfortunately, something went wrong. I know Daryk had to go in past the palace guard--she had no antechamber--perhaps there is where the mission went ill. He had to kill four men while escaping."

Le-Valle grimaced.

"How is she?" Harper asked quietly.

"Princess Cassandra? Oh, she is well. She has gotten over most of the scare. She's worried about Daryk, of course. Thinks it is her fault, her responsibility."

"What about her family?"

"Mardynn is scouring the lands for her. He has sent envoys to Tolliver to inquire about the possible presence of Daryk. We have him hidden well, so I don't think he will be found by them."

"He is with you?" Lleric asked.

"Yes."

"Why doesn't she contact her father?" Melissa asked.

"I don't think she misses him as much as he misses her." Cedric left it at that. Melissa nodded with melancholy understanding. She had experienced the same type of relationship with her mother. It was not something she was proud of.

"What of the testing?" Stacey asked.

Cedric beamed. His brooding countenance evaporated to reveal the earnest, expressive man the group admired so much. To many of them, he was like a father.

"Successful!" he exclaimed. "She is undeniably a Talisman. It is going to take some time before she gets used to the idea, though. I think it is important not to rush her. Gregory never was comfortable with his powers; I think that was because we pushed him faster than he was ready to go. In time, she will come to terms with her heritage. Then, we will teach her."

"Wait a moment!" Harper threw his splayed hands to either side of his body, as if he were balancing himself. "If the princess--who we thought was a human--is a Talisman, is it not also possible that the other three human targets killed by these assassins were Talismen as well?"

"No," Baena said. Harper was about to protest against her flat denial; he had been quite proud of his deduction. "I wish it were that easy, Harper. We noticed the possibility, too, and checked on it. At least two of the victims were human. We are sure of that."

"They are dead!" Harper argued. "How can you be sure?"

"We just are."

Baena's tone reminded Cedric of his own mother's answer to his persistent questions: "Because I said so." Like Cedric had done those many years ago, Harper humbly submitted and dropped the subject. Cedric knew that there were ways to determine Talismanic origins even after death, but Baena would have had to have examined the corpses. Ugh! that was a repulsive thought.

Cedric pinched the crown of his nose, rubbing between his eyes. He was tired. The meeting was getting tedious. He wanted

to get back to Daryk but he knew that it would be several hours before he would be able to return home.

He ran a hand across his balding head. Most of them had arrived by *pass-door*, the Talismen carrying the *hollowmen*. That meant that he was going to have to make two *passes* before he got any rest tonight. Of course Harper and Melissa would be returning to Tryfall by horse. The Mastershaper had decided to visit Tryfall for a few weeks and his aide had accompanied him. But that still left Reyman and Le-Valle. Perhaps Lleric and Stacey would volunteer to carry them. Of course, with this growing fear of *passing*, he wouldn't blame them if they didn't want to take the *hollows* home.

Which brought him to his next question.

"What have we found out about the occluded doors, Baena?"

Lleric and Stacey, whose attention had been wandering, sat a little straighter. In the past few months, three people had died in occluded doors. They had *passed* straight into *nothing*!

A *pass* is an all or nothing endeavor. Halfway through a *pass*, you cannot simply decide to turn back. It is a leap. Lately, these leaps have had the danger of ending in death.

"Perhaps I have less information than you, Cedric," the old Magus began. "It has been difficult, since I am not a Talisman, but I will tell you all I know. As best I understand it, the *pass-doors* do not actually propel you through space. They are merely portals linked to one another. According to the tome I discovered, they work through a theory that states the fabric of the universe bends. Therefore, the actual distance of any given trip is about the same, although the energy required to pull the points together differs greatly with distance.

"Or something like that," she finished lamely.

Cedric, seeing looks of incomprehension, tried another approach. He removed a small tapestry from the wall and placed it on the floor.

"All right," he said. "Pretend this tapestry is the land. This warrior represents Tryfall; this castle, Cyford. Now, when someone *passes*, the base and the target are brought together like so." He lifted the two edges of the fabric and touched the warrior to the castle. "The magic needed to perform such a move is very draining and even if a person is just being carried, they will normally black out. Of course, you all know that. Over time, a resistance can be built up by the Talisman and he can learn to avert the reflex to go unconscious. The skill of the Talisman and the distance between the two points are all factors in making the *pass*. Now, this is an oversimplification of the process but you understand the basics.

"Usually, if a destination cannot be attained, a Talisman will know before he attempts the trip. He will be unable to 'fix' onto the target, so he will know not to try the *pass*."

"Which is why these occluded doors are so disturbing," Baena resumed. "From what I have been told, there is no indication that the destination has been closed. So a Talisman will *pass* unknowingly into...well...nothing, I suppose."

She looked at Cedric for affirmation.

He frowned.

"Unfortunately, we don't understand enough about the magic of the *pass-doors*. The skill of our ancestors far surpassed our own; and many of our forefather's secrets we have now lost. Perhaps someday we will be able to rescue some books from the destroyed library of Caerlydd. Until then, I fear we must wallow in our ignorance.

"As to where they go: we just don't know. Do they go somewhere else? To another, forgotten place? Do they end up perhaps embedded in a rock for all eternity? Are they trapped in the *door*, itself? Or do they simply disappear? Truthfully, your guess is as good as mine."

"Then they might have just gone somewhere else?" Melissa suggested hopefully. "They might not be dead."

Cedric tried to find the best way to phrase his answer.

"M'lady," he began hesitantly. "We know they are dead. You see, along with people, messages--psychic messages--can be sent along the *passways*. Perhaps you have heard of the Talismen sending what are called reflections?" She nodded. "Well, we know they are dead because we heard their screams when they died."

Stacey shuddered violently; Melissa decided that if it upset Stacey so much, then she certainly didn't want to *pass* ever again if she were going to hear those screams.

"Luckily," Cedric continued. "The *pass-doors* are rarely used at all any more. They mainly serve as a means of communication--although that is difficult--because most of the Talismen have forgotten how to use them."

"Several decades ago," Baena interrupted. "The Talismen shut down all the *pass-doors* in the Circle Lands. They were reinstated over twenty years ago by Dennis Stephan Haesel-Tigth when relations began between the eastern wilderlands and the Circle Lands."

"Daryk's father?" Cedric asked, surprised.

Baena smiled, happy to find that she knew something of Cedric's people that even he did not know.

"Yes."

"But why did they stop using them in the first place?"

"One of the sources suggested that they were experiencing the same kinds of problems we are. But it was penned around the time Haesel-Tigth reactivated them, so I am unsure of its verity."

"What did it say was the cause of the *door's* failures?"

"It did not," Baena rubbed her temples. "It offered a few suggestions, however."

"What were they?"

Baena sighed.

"One," she counted off on her fingers. "The *doors* were purposefully tampered with; two, the Talisman did something wrong; or three, the *doors* themselves were deteriorating."

"I'm not sure which of those is more disturbing," Cedric said. "I cannot imagine why someone would deliberately sabotage the *pass-doors*...unless it were someone acting out of hatred towards the Talismen."

He looked at Baena questioningly.

"You mean a human?" she asked. "No, I doubt it. If the Talismen cannot figure out how they work, I seriously doubt that even a powerful Magus could discover enough about them to incapacitate them. I went to the one here that was reputed to link Lord Thadd to the Talisman, Paal Bahndt. I could feel nothing. If I had not seen all of you materialize from it, I would have never believed that it even existed."

"All right, so no human disabled it. But whoever may be doing it has succeeded in not only knocking out the passage, but also in creating a death-trap for whoever tries to use it. Of course, there are the other possibilities. If it was the fault of the Talismen, then we have a very big problem."

"Why?" Melissa asked.

"Well, m'lady, Talismen are never taught how to use their powers. It is something inborn, innate. We work our magic, not by thinking about it, but by not thinking about it. Talisman magic is merely something done or not done. If passing is something that can be done incorrectly...well, it goes against everything I have ever read or heard about Talismanic magic. Of course, I am a Circle Talisman--Daryk would know more about that than I would. In any case, the possibility of making a mistake while performing Talismanic magic is terrifying!"

They were silent a moment, taking it all in.

"And I can see why the last prospect is so disturbing to you," Harper told Cedric. "If the pass-doors are deteriorating on their own, then there is nothing to stop all the rest from failing also, am I right?"

"Yes, my son. You are"

They sat in silence, thinking their own private thoughts as the candles burned lower and the blue moon rose higher.

Harper nudged Stacey's elbow playfully.

"Are you sure you don't want to borrow one of our horses?"

* * * * *

Ashley calmly surveyed the inn's open common area.

The inn was called the *Three-Legged Horse*.

Sounds harmless, she had thought.

She wasn't so sure, now. The Common was full, but quiet. Intensely quiet. Menacingly quiet.

She could feel the calculating eyes of the patrons examining her body. She had often endured the uncomfortable experience of having men rape her with their eyes, but this was different. Before, their gazes were filled with lust; now, their eyes were filled with murder.

"May I help you, m'lord?" the Inn Master asked.

Of course, before, everyone thought she was a woman.

"One room." She had a low voice, as low as a man's.

The Inn Master was a dirty, portly man. His teeth were black and his eyes were a cloudy white. He squinted at her and ran a filthy hand through his precocious beard. His pink tongue lolled flatly out of his mouth.

"Seven Pieces, one night," he growled, sounding drunk. "None of that Circle excrement; only Hall gold."

She frowned. The *Three-Legged Horse* didn't look like it was doing enough business for its master to be demanding Whitehall currency, even from a stranger such as she.

"Three."

"Ourmph!" he belched in indignation. "Seven. Paid first. Or no room."

He breathed heavily through his mouth, looking mildly constipated. He reeked of stale food and bad wine. His stomach protruded from his undershirt, looking to be about the same color as a dead fish. He was revolting.

Money was no problem. Ashley had enough to last her for months. But this man had annoyed her. His impertinence was infuriating; he knew nothing about how to be a good host.

So Ashley decided to stop being a good patron.

"I'll tell you what, my friend," she whispered. "I'll pay you two gold pieces and I'll promise that no accidents happen tonight while you're sleeping."

His eyes darkened.

"Seven!"

"Two," she said softly. "And there will be nothing that catches afire tonight."

His eyes widened, in anger or fear, she couldn't tell.

"Seven!"

Am I talking to the town idiot?

"My friend," she murmured quietly, so that no one else could hear. "Let me explain it to you this way: if I were to pay seven pieces of Hall gold to spend one night here, I would expect a drawn bath, Vandoraean sheets, a chilled rouge and you to tuck me into bed. As a matter of fact, I would expect no less than a goodnight kiss."

She placed her hand on his cheek, so that the point of the stiletto strapped beneath her sleeve pricked the base of the Inn Master's flabby neck.

"Truly," she confessed. "I don't think I could help but show how I feel about paying a mere seven pieces for your enchanting company."

She thought the blade drew blood through her tunic sleeve.

The master's eyes were as dead as a fish's. He betrayed no fear and, for a moment, Ashley thought she had made a mistake. Then a thin line of drool rolled out of the corner of his mouth.

"Two," he muttered weakly.

"Excellent!"

Her features were very feminine--even beautiful--but she had

her father's eyes. She usually got what she wanted. She knew exactly where to look inside a man to make him do her bidding. She had learned some things from her family of thieves, but some things just can't be taught: she had found that when trying to coerce someone to your will, sometimes it pays to have inherited the eyes of a killer.

The Inn Master was nearly twice her size, but he was soft and slow. Her father was a small man, actually shorter than she, but he had a presence. She had learned to imitate his arrogant stride and suspected she exuded the same deportment. Even though the Inn Master towered above her, he was cowering now under the weight of her gaze.

He laughed nervously; then his eyes--full of half-hidden wile--flicked over her shoulder and he nodded, laughing more hardily. She smiled grimly. There would be visitors tonight.

"This way."

He led her away from the common room into the bowels of the inn. She could feel the sharp knife-eyes pressing against her exposed back. She wanted to run after the Inn Master, to escape, but she purposefully slowed her gait to a leisurely stroll.

The Inn Master guided her to a small, dirty room that had yellowed rags hanging over boarded-up windows. The stained mattress rested flat on the moldering floor and the small endtable hunkered down on one of the mattress's corners because one of its legs was broken.

"Shall I pay you now?" Ashley asked, watching the cloudy whites of his eyes. He scrubbed his front teeth with his finger.

"Pay when you leave."

Uh-oh. Bad sign.

He slammed the door, closing her in. She could hear him jingle down the hall and out of sight. She hadn't noticed the jingle before; perhaps it just wasn't significant before. Now, she feared the sound was very significant.

The jingling was keys.

Keys to rooms.

Her room.

Quickly she perused the small cell. The windows were firmly boarded. No one would enter through there. The walls were thick and solid. She could find no peepholes or secret doors. The floor was stone and mold. She sat down on the mattress.

Okay. One way in, one way out.

That was good and bad.

Good because there was only one entrance; bad because there was only one exit. If there was an attack, she would know where it would come from; if she had to run, they would know where she would run to. Somehow, she needed to discourage an attack.

For the next hour, she prepared for the expected visit. Then, an hour before sunset, she retired to bed. The mattress was lumpy but adequate. She expected the men by midnight. When they didn't come, she drifted off into a troubled slumber.

She awoke just before dawn to the sound of muted voices in the hall outside her room. She thought she could distinguish three

gruff voices. There was a soft jingling and the lock rattled once. She heard the rasp of metal on metal.

"Ready?" a whispery voice asked.

She didn't hear the answer. A moment later there was a quiet *thud!* as one of the men shouldered the door open. It only moved a few inches.

Then Ashley heard a satisfying *splash!* as a bucket of wine and excrement sloshed down on the unwary rogues. Cries of surprise and indignation exploded from the hallway.

She giggled. She hadn't been sure that it was going to work.

Enraged, one of the scoundrels charged the door. It slid open another three inches--almost wide enough for a small man to slip through--then stopped. Ashley had made several wedges out of the endtable and had forced them under the door. They had worked well initially, but now they were sliding across the smooth stones.

The aperture between the door and the wall was widening; the man on the other side had forced his shoulder through and was attempting to gain some leverage to squeeze his way in.

Ashley grabbed her sword and ran to the door. She sank her finely crafted Tryfallian blade into the meat of his shoulder. With a curse, he retreated from the room.

The ruckus began to draw the attention of other patrons of the inn. Ashley could hear cries and doors opening beyond the cracked door. Straining, she heard the shuffle of the knaves' feet running away.

She was shaking so badly that she had to sit down in the center of the room. She cried quietly for a moment--in relief or fear--then collected her things and left the *Three-Legged Horse*. She dropped two gold pieces in the Inn Master's coffer in the common room on her way out.

Unnerved, but proud of her self-sufficiency, she escaped into the predawn.

* * * * *

"Did Lleric seem a little irritable to you?"

Melissa guided her palfrey absently, her changing eyes a tired azure.

"We all did. Besides, what do you expect? He just lost his best friend. I think he deserves to be irritable."

"I'm sorry." Harper apologized. "I am thoughtless. You're right: he was acting strangely because of Gregory."

His mind swam with images from the meeting, creating an engrossing, terrifying collage in his mind.

Assassins. Occluded doors. The Dark One.

He was beginning to think that Myland was becoming the subject

of some bombastic troubadour's poorly done lay.

He was impatient for resolution.

Probably because I'm a musician, he mused.

He was anxious to hear what Cedric could glean from the Grey Prince. Yes, Harper decided, Daryk Frost was the key to it all.

TWELVE

Daryk Frost.

By the time Princess Cassandra Farrington reached her tenth birthday, Daryk Frost was a legend. His name was known throughout the Circle Lands and wherever his name traveled, it seemed, death followed. It was rumored that a hundred *diadems* were offered for his head. On one *diadem*, a person could live comfortably for a year in Whitehall. With twenty *diadems*, a person could build a small castle. With a hundred, a small kingdom. Yet, most people did not believe all the stories about the infamous Daryk Frost. Some only believed the romantic and heroic stories. More only believed the evil tales. As for the man himself, he was a mystery. He was a king, and loved for it; he was a Talisman, and hated for it; he was an orphan, and pitied for it; he was a warrior, and feared for it. He was many things to many people, yet at the time, he was only sixteen. To Princess Cassandra, he was a monster in a bedtime story. To her father, he was a threat to the peace of the kingdom and a contemptible enemy.

Daryk Frost was born Faellyn Daryk Haesel-Tigth in the castle of Caerlydd in the mythical land of Glendale. He was the only child of Dennis Stephan Haesel-Tigth and the beautiful woods' daughter, Katheryn Anne Caaney. Tradition affirmed that Daryk manifested elvish blood from his mother and Daemon's blood from his magician-king father. His first name in the elvish tongue means "beautiful to the God." Whether or not Daryk's mother actually enjoyed a fey lineage was unclear; the fact that Daryk inherited his father's magical prowess was not. By the time he had reached five years, the young prince had already mastered the fundamentals of the art. Many predicted that he would be the most powerful Talisman king ever. Fate disagreed.

Caerlydd was a magnificent city. For two hundred years, it had been home to the enigmatic Talismen, those mighty, dreaded sorcerers who, according to legend, were cousins to the Daemons. The tales of Caerlydd's resplendent loveliness and exotic culture reached clear across the great Harte forest and instilled fear, awe and envy in the Circlemen. The castle's architecture baffled the greatest masons and engineers of the age. The palace was fashioned entirely out of a stone unknown to the rest of Myland called covalph. Smooth, beautiful and impervious. Or so they thought.

A few months after Cassandra Farrington turned four, travellers informed Warynn that Caerlydd had fallen--the inspiring castle lay in ruin, the people of that brave kingdom were scattered. What force decimated the great city? Reports were

You say it.
Do you show
it?

contradictory. Some said a raiding force of Nortmen had lain siege to Caerlydd and conquered the city. Other accounts swore that Daemons had assaulted the walls. Considering the myths surrounding Caerlydd and the Talismen, it is not surprising that the populace of the Circle Lands embraced the tale of the Daemons' wrath. People speculated that the Dark One's minions were exacting some form of revenge upon their disobedient kin. Today, thirteen years later, the fate of Caerlydd still remains unclear.

Prince Faellyn, it was told, had escaped and sequestered himself among the Crown Dwarves of the north. Daryk was championed by the people because he was a child who had outwitted the wolves. The boy-king-without-a-kingdom had escaped the supernatural attack of the Adversary and had fled to safety. Troubadours sang the melancholy story of a child with no family, no home, no recourse. Soon the tale of his desperate escape became almost as well-known as the *Ballad of Gwindalyn and Ffalynor* or the saga of the exodus of the High Elves. The song told how, besieged by Daemon-lords, Prince Faellyn utilized his magic and swordsmanship to elude his murderous foes.

"It was really just luck, he tells me," Devin confided to Cassie as he rubbed his eyes wearily.

She stretched her feet closer to the fireplace and wiggled her toes deliciously. She had coaxed and cajoled the shy giant to relinquish all the information he would about the Greyman; the man-at-arms had grudgingly acquiesced, and for nearly three hours, now, Devin Lattimore had been spitting out all the yesterdays of his relationship with the Grey Prince.

He had been the Talisman's aide for five years, his best friend for nearly that long. He owed the Grey Prince his life because of several occasions and, in fact, began the friendship in debt.

"I'd left Fanydd at sun up," the lord had recalled when Cassie had first breached the subject. "I was after a fine Darklin stag a friend had spotted the day previous. Not to kill it--mind you--merely to see it. I have an...appreciation...for things lovely and graceful and beautiful." Inoculated?

He blushed. The princess had already noted his embarrassed, boyish appreciation of her.

"Anyway," he continued. "I was pushing Thunderbird, my mount, as hard as she would go--I ride a little fast--" he added a sheepishly. "When all of a sudden, this tree jumped out in front of me. It was lying in wait; just hoping for some plump, young nobleman to ride near, I'm sure. Then it pounced! And it got me. I never saw it. Next thing I knew, I was lying at the bottom of a gully with a broken leg and half a rein."

He laughed deprecatingly.

"I must have been quite a poor sight," he mused. "By the time he found me I had been living on grass and roots and berries for nearly two weeks. Of course it seemed much longer than that. I had dragged myself several miles--I don't know how far--and was fairly incoherent. My leg had gotten infected and I'd lost forty pounds--of course, on me that's not so great an amount."

He shifted and Cassandra noticed once again his nervous, fidgety, boyish nature. He seemed to be constantly moving and only infrequently looked directly at her when he told his tale.

"He told me that when he found me, I tried to fight him. I don't remember. He had no mount, so he carried me across his shoulders back to Fanydd. Me!

"M'lady," he said with studied understatement. "I am no small man."

She giggled and Devin smiled furtively. The Greyman was about six feet tall, under two-hundred pounds; Devin was at least four inches taller, over three-hundred pounds. Yes, indeed, that would have been quite a sight!

"In any case, he carried me back to Fanydd and I was immediately recognized and taken to my family's quarters--they are cast-nobles, you know--where I was healed and given time to rest. I had no clue as to what happened until almost a week and a half later. Daryk had simply disappeared. Probably a good thing, too. In Fanydd, most people have a severe distrust of Westerners; and Daryk Frost is about as "west" as it gets. I understand that some unnamed parties had promised to throw him in the dungeon if he showed his face again. Others had planned on simply killing him for that damned bounty.

"Anyway, just as easily as he vanished, he reappeared one night at my bedside. Like a cat. I just opened my eyes and he was there. Just looking at me. It startled me and I let out a little cry; his hand closed on my mouth like a kettle-lid. He didn't let go for at least a minute, I'm sure, but when he did--well, I just knew that he would never hurt me. I don't know how or why; it was irrational. I can't explain it, I just felt safe."

Devin didn't need to explain it. Not to Cassie. She had felt it in her room in Warynn when he had extended his hand to her and said, "Trust me." It was the wildest, stupidest thing the princess had ever done, going with the Greyman, yet she had known it was right even then.

"I asked him what happened and he gave me a brief synopsis--leaving out the fact that he had no mount with which to carry me home--and asked me how I was coming along. I told him that I could vaguely remember being struck by the tree. He told me that there was a secret to avoiding such a fate in the future. He told me that you have to be smarter than the tree. Oooh, that made me mad. But it also made me laugh later. We braced and introduced ourselves. "Daryk Frost," he said. "Vile, repugnant Westerner slime." I laughed and answered in kind: "Devin Lattimore, brave, courteous Darklin tree-jouster." Ah, we laughed so hard that night."

"Funny," Cassie mused. "I can't picture him laughing. Smiling that smile of his, yes. Laughing, no."

"Well, he doesn't much anymore."

They sat in silence for a while. Then Devin found some Fanydd Red and they settled down closer to the fire and he continued his account. Cassie was surprised to discover that the big man was only two years older than she was. He looked older. Maybe it was

just the beard. The Greyman had grown a beard also in the short weeks that followed his injury. Devin looked good with a beard. The Greyman didn't. Of course, he was still feverishly ill. But the beard hid his face, and there was too much hidden there already.

Much of Devin's tale related what she already knew of the man, but she was amazed at how much she still did not know. While she had read extensively on the ancient histories of Myland, she had only read one account of the Northern Campaign of the Unified Army, and for the first time doubted the text's verisimilitude.

All of Devin's narrative came directly from the Greyman himself, but she found that Daryk Frost was a very private man, so even Devin knew precious little.

Frost had told Devin that he remembered little of Caerlydd because he was so young. Devin wasn't sure he believed that.

"Cedric says that he had heard of Faellyn Haesel-Tigth long before Caerlydd fell and he doubts that Daryk--called a prodigy by many--really has forgotten those years."

"Maybe he wants to forget," Cassie suggested, realizing with flushed cheeks that that might be true of her.

Devin considered this for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. You see, m'lady, Caerlydd was supposed to be an absolutely spectacular city. Its majestic architecture and choice culture were reputedly unparalleled. His father was--at least according to Cedric--the finest ruler the west has ever known. Donal also tells me that the entire area was supposedly so suffused with love and caring and compassion that civil strife and conflict were virtually unheard of in the Talisman kingdom. True, the people over here have never especially loved 'Lyddians but that would not have touched a boy as young as he.

"Besides, he always seems to reminisce with a smile on his face. I think he remembers. And maybe it's not so much that he doesn't want to remember; maybe he doesn't want to forget. When you tell someone about somebody you love, you have to take him out of your head and try to put him into words. That always seems to make him smaller, more insignificant. Because the words just aren't big enough, aren't grand enough. And when you try to stuff him back into your head, into your memories, you lose a little bit...here and there...and he diminishes. So the more you talk about him, the smaller he gets, the less important he becomes. I think Daryk knows that.

"He loved his father very much. He probably doesn't want to forget him; to forget the pain. I think he has those keepsakes locked tightly away, only to be pulled out and looked at on special occasions."

Cassie breathed a smile.

"You have quite a poet trapped there inside you Devin Lattimore," she said.

He blushed.

"Everyone in this house is a poet. Poets and dreamers. Who else would have adopted the Grey Prince? Who else would have trusted his dreams?"

Cassie did not want to talk about the Greyman's dreams.

"What about Caerlydd?" she asked, trying to bring the conversation back around to his history instead.

"Well, Daryk was only a child then--not quite ten--and he was not allowed to fight in the defence of Caerlydd. So he watched from the battlements with his mother. I'm not really sure why the 'Lyddians were drawn out of the castle, but they were. I can almost picture his father from Daryk's description: tall, proud, his white mane flowing regally about him, his 'Lyddian armor glittering, his witchblade drawn. And...and then dead.

"Slain by the same kind of monster the Roamers and the Corsairs keep telling us about. Daryk tells me that with the Nortmen, to Glendale had come a breed of hideous creatures totally foreign to man. He said the abominations were well over six feet, had charcoal-grey skin, luminous red eyes, a dirty, matted coat of fur and vicious fang-like teeth. A that time, no one had ever seen the likes of these and when the small phalanx of ogres approached, no one knew what they were--what to call the monstrosities.

"He told me that he heard a child cry out, relating them to the only personification of evil she knew."

"Look, Mommy!" she screamed. "Here come the boogeymans!"

"Bogeys!" Cassie had the eerie feeling that she was hearing one of her father's bed-time stories.

"Yes. I'm not really sure if that is where the name truly originated, but it sounds reasonable. Anyway, the name stuck. The Bogeys--a grown-up version of the bedtime story name--were fierce and murderous. Although they looked like beasts, and thus stupid, they fought like professional soldiers. Daryk told me that they reminded him of the wargaming figures his father used to teach him the art of war. They never broke rank and executed difficult maneuvers with ease. And each of the monsters fought like ten men, so although there was only one company of the Bogeys, they were devastating.

"From the castle, Daryk--Prince Faellyn--saw his father fall and his father's guardsmen sorely beset by the monsters. So, disobeying his king and father, he leapt upon a horse, ordered the guardsman to open the gates, and led a small force to King Dennis' aid. To no avail. By the time he reached his father's side, the king was dead, slain by a Bogey's axe. The prince fought valiantly but was captured and shackled, a prize for the victors.

"He was whipped and tortured and from the enemy camp forced to watch as the only home he had ever known crumbled to the ground. He was taken away in chains. His parents were dead, his people exiled, his kingdom a shambles. He had no hope.

"Yet the God who sees all stepped in and saved him. Almost literally."

Devin stroked his trim beard thoughtfully.

It was hard for Cassie to imagine Aan saving Daryk Frost from anything. In all her father's tales about him, he had commanded the monsters, not been their prisoner. She shuddered as she remembered how each of his stories about him ended and how smugly Mardynn had killed the daemon-prince off. Of course that Daryk had

fangs and a tail. She had not really thought about her father for a while; had not wondered if he was searching for her; had not wondered if he was worried. She decided rather coldly that she did not miss him very much and did not want to think about him now.

"As the army continued its northwesterly sweep, soon it was obvious that their next target would be the Crown Halls of the dwarves in the Coronet Mountains. The Halls were celebrated for their riches and skillful weaponsmaking and mining. No man had ever seen the insides of the mountains. The move for the Crown Halls would have indeed been ambitious, but the Nortman army never made it that far.

"They were travelling up along the fringes of the Branchwood forest towards the Coronet when they received an unexpected surprise. Just as they gained the edge of the woods, a horn sounded behind them. Wheeling around, the army discovered that they had been flanked by a host of Havenmen who had been concealed in the forest. The Nortman force tried to turn and fight but were immediately cut off from their supplies. Not one survived. As they turned on the men from Foresthaven, a host of dwarves from the Crown Halls attacked from the north. It was a total rout. As for the Bogeys, no one saw any monsters at all and were beginning to wonder if the tales of Caerlydd's demise were true.

"Of course, now there are so many reports of the Bogeys that I don't see how any intelligent man could doubt their existence."

"My father says that they don't exist."

Devin muttered something under his breath that sounded like "point proven" but then quickly proceeded with his tale.

"Anyway, although the Roamers and Corsairs have purported the existence of such creatures for years, their reputations kept anyone from listening seriously to them. And if it weren't for the Paladin, I don't think anyone would have believed Daryk either. Of course, he was very young."

"The Paladin?"

"Well, yes. Don't you know about that?"

"No." For all her books, Cassie was feeling really ignorant.

"Daryk wouldn't tell me much about it, but a few years back I talked to a Havenman who claims he was there. Name was Osrick. Cut across the face in the battle. He can do a really impressive trick with a petticoat and a dagger; you see he...well, anyway. He told me that he was there. He saw Daryk trying to tell everyone that not only Bogeys attacked the castle, but Daemons, too. I don't know if that's true. Daryk didn't mention it. He said that no one was listening to him until the Paladin spoke. He said, 'My friends, the boy speaks the truth! I promise you that monsters have come out of the Nortland. I have seen them with my own eyes. There is evil breeding in the north and soon will come the time when we must venture forth to destroy the enemies of Aan!'"

Devin poured himself a glass of the Red, swirled it around in the glass, and downed it in a swallow. A few drops tried to escape the corners of his mouth but he leaned forward and captured them with quick fingertips.

"Of course," he continued. "Daryk didn't know that the man

was the Paladin at the time. Sand and scars, he'd never even heard the name Barrimore Sael before."

Neither had Cassie.

Devin saw the confusion in her face and explained.

"He was the Paladin before Eanderthall of Tolwyn. He was called Barrimore the Red; he was an elf."

That sounded vaguely familiar to her. Inwardly she cursed herself for her concentration on the ancients. Over the years, she had neglected her attention of recent history, giving preference to old legends, the dying Elvish language and all non-modern texts.

She regretted it now.

"Anyway, the Paladin told Daryk, 'One day soon, I will fight these *Bogeys*. I will come for you.' Then he left, and King Sindri of the Coronet Mountains took Daryk into his keeping. He led Daryk to his home and raised him for four years with the dwarves. Soon, because of his benevolence, the king received the surname of *Manfriend*. Dwarves are kind of funny that way: do just about anything to get another name. They called Daryk *Teschka* which means 'pet' in the Common. He doesn't talk about that much either. Did you know that he is the only man to ever see the inside of the Crown Halls?"

"Yes, I did," Cassie murmured. Mardynn had told her that the dwarves were an evil race bent on the destruction of the men of the Circle Lands. She knew about Daryk Frost's sojourn there.

"So anyway, coming back to Barrimore Sael...no one knew from whence he came. Before him, it had been almost two hundred years since a Paladin had walked in Myland. He came warning of evil growing in the north. It had been a long time since the lands had seen a Paladin, so few heeded his warnings. Then *Caerlydd* fell. The dwarves and men of *Foresthaven* rallied behind him and again Myland believed. As he promised, Sael returned for the prince. Four years had passed, but Daryk said the man had not changed the slightest bit.

"The time had arrived for a Paladin once more to enter into the *Spoiler's* lair. Daryk--Prince *Faellyn*--followed King Sindri and the small army of dwarves into the *Nortland*. The journey was arduous and the force was all but obliterated, several months later, when it finally reached the *Shade Valley*. Somehow, Cedric told me, Daryk used his magic to appear in *Whitehall* and beseech King *Thomin Allen Lestt Erindale* to aid the Paladin. At the time, Cedric was the King's Advisor and he supported such a move."

Cassie blinked. She didn't know that.

"The king not only sent an impressive host, but also went himself. His eldest sons, *Garead* and *Gable*, came with him to fight the legions of the *Dark One*. The rest of the Circle Lands were so impressed by the High King's bravery that *Tryfall*, *Warynn*, *Cyford* and *Fanydd* all sent troops and the kingdoms of *Tryfall* and *Warynn* sent their royalty. *Tryfall* issued King *Mattryss Danlyn* and his son, *Prince Morrigan*; *Warynn* proffered King *Gammilyn Farrington*, his brother *Mardynn* and the king's son, *Carryn*...but I suppose you're familiar with that part."

She was.

"The Unified Army of Myland--actually quite a pompous and arrogant misnomer--marched upon Cyranderra and planned to take Ashentop itself. Something went wrong. The force from the center lands and the Coronet was met by an immense hoard of Nortmen and Bogeys. At Cyranderra, King Erindale of Whitehall fell, murdered by an enemy's arrow. The army was forced to retreat southward. Twenty leagues short of Aslynn Pass, the Bogeys and Nortmen struck again and the force from the Circle Lands was split asunder. Half of the host was forced north to D'cathyl, half forced to stand and fight. Daryk and the Paladin were among those compelled to resist rather than run. Late in the second day of the battle, the tide turned for the Circlemen and the dwarves. It appeared that victory was certain for the army, but the evil hoard from the north would not surrender.

"The black necromancers of Daevalege had been conjuring for the better part of the day, offering live sacrifices to the fire. Suddenly, as dark descended, the ground began to shake and a deep rumble stretched through the twilight. The sacrificial flame exploded and a Daemon Lord arose from the smoldering embers. He stood twenty feet tall and brandished a long scythe. His head was that of a lion's but his body was black and covered with iridescent scales. He had a long, thick tail, with which he balanced, and sharp talons on both his arms and feet. The fighting stopped, except for a few skirmishes, the moment he arrived. The Paladin went to meet him. The Daemon's blade on his scythe was almost as tall as Barrimore Sael. The Paladin knelt before the monster and lowered his head in prayer. The Daemon Lord realized what was happening and screamed in terror--at least that's how Daryk relates it--he swung his scythe at the kneeling warrior and struck him upon his helmeted brow. The Paladin's helm was torn from his head, dented and cloven. The Daemon Lord rose his scythe to finish the noble swordsman but was stabbed in the leg by Mattryss, King of Tryfall. The Daemon wheeled and attacked, cutting the man open and killing him instantly. He then turned triumphantly on the Paladin and laughed. The servant of Aan stood and raised his blade above his head. Like lightning, the scythe moved, slicing Barrimore Sael nearly in half. The Paladin fell to his knees, kissed his blade, and hurled it at the Daemon Lord. The blade found home in the fiend's left knee. Bellowing in agony, the lion-thing fell to the ground. It could not regain its feet. On opposite sides of the monster, Daryk and Morrigan Danlyn attacked. Daryk pierced the monster's heart, Prince Morrigan, Mattryss' son, had delivered a similar blow through the Daemon's throat. With a despairing gurgle, the Demon Lord imploded into oblivion, leaving the two bewildered young warriors staring at each other frightenedly."

"They killed it?"

"Yes, m'lady."

"Wait...so, there were Bogeys there that everyone saw and a Daemon Lord that rose out of a fire?"

"Yes."

"Oh," Cassie said lamely. That was not what she had been told by her father.

"Anyway," Devin continued, sounding slightly disgruntled by all her interruptions. "As for the other half of the army, they did not fare so well. The exasperated force was pushed back northward toward Ashentop, eventually taking refuge in D'cathyl--that's the old castle that used to be called Forestwatch--near Vigilwood. The old fortress had been abandoned for decades; it was rumored to be haunted.

"Well, by the time Daryk, Morrigan and the rest of the ragtag army reached D'cathyl, the Nortmen and the Bogeys were gone; the men of Myland were dead. Few survivors were found. Five stalwart dwarves had barricaded themselves in one of the twin towers of D'cathyl. They were wounded and weary beyond comprehension but would not rest until they knew the fate of their king. It seems that when the army was split, King Sindri and a small number of dwarves--his escort--were forced north away from Daryk and the Paladin and the Tryfallian prince. The dead dwarfking was found in the stronghold's small library. His infamous war hammer, Bherendkhal Foebane, was not with him. What was with him was carnage. The dead bodies of dozens of Bogeys littered the floor. The twin princes of Whitehall were together with a dwarf who was unidentifiable. The place stank of death and the army fled the haunted castle before nightfall. Among the survivors a lone man stood out. He was gaunt and pale, yet commanded the evacuation as if he were king, which, in fact, he was. Mardynn Farrington somehow survived the terror of D'cathyl with not even a scratch."

Cassie flinched.

"Unbeknownst to him, his brother, Gammilyn and nephew, Carryn had not been so lucky. He commanded the throne of Warynn. All in all, thirty-seven men and five dwarves survived the ordeal. Of those, eleven of the men died within a week.

"The toll of the northern campaign was enormous. The Paladin, dead. Four kings, dead. Three princes, dead. Inestimable numbers of warriors, dead. The remaining force was disheartened. The disillusioned warriors wanted no more of the monsters of the north. Morrigan Danlyn and Faellyn Daryk Haesel-Tigth entreated the men to regroup, nurse their wounds and their pride, and continue after the Bogeys. The monsters would not simply go away, they reasoned. It was of no use. Too many had died and too many feared dying. The Unified army of Myland went home in disgrace."

"You talk like you were there."

"I was," Devin admitted. "My older brother, David--named after the king--died there."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Devin." Cassie tried to calculate how old he would have been. Ten? Maybe eleven? "What were you doing there?"

"It doesn't matter. Anyway, Morrigan's mother became queen of Tryfall and now the prince constantly patrols the Shield and Vigilwood, preparing his kingdom for the return of the monsters. Daryk went first to Whitehall to petition the new king for aid in pursuing the Bogeys. But the heir apparent was only nine. A Council of Regents had been formed to deal with matters of the state. The boy could only ascend the throne when the Paladin or his king returned to Whitehall to place the crown upon his head.

Such was the custom. His father and brothers were dead. His father had placed the ascension crown upon the heads of both twins but not his youngest. He had not believed any of them would die. He was wrong.

"Daryk told the Council of the circumstances of their deaths but they said the law is the law and would not let the boy prince, Anthony, claim the throne. They granted Daryk no army and firmly but politely requested that he leave Whitehall. He went next to Warynn, where he was almost killed. King Mardynn blamed him for the northern fiasco and banished him from Warynn."

This was one part of modern history Cassie knew well.

"The response was much the same in Tolliver, Fanydd and Cyford. Tryfall was more charitable, but offered no aid. Daryk had been the one who had originally come from the dwarvish army to ask for aid. And I think many of the people of the Circle Lands blamed him for the deaths of their loved ones. Our prince of Caerlydd became a very feared and hated man. Soon, there was a price upon his head. Fleeing assassins, he returned to the wilderland of Glendale. Some say he joined up with the Corsairs, the roving land pirates who police as well as terrorize the west. Some say he went to live in Foresthaven; some say Tolwyn. Others speculated that he returned to the dwarves. Still others say he did not dwell in any home, but wandered through Dellwood and the mysterious Myth'll. Rumors continued to drift across the Harte to the Circle Lands, but no one knows for sure what he did. I don't know what he did."

"You don't even know?" Cassie asked. "But you said that you're his closest friend; and you don't even know? God, Devin! Who does he talk to?"

"I don't know," Devin shrugged. "Himself, I guess. God. Sometimes me."

"That's deplorable!"

"That's Daryk. Anyway, going back to the story: when he disappeared, Daryk was sixteen. Three years later, he returned to the Circle Lands a legend--and a man. His hair had grown nearly to his waist in the back; he was leaner, stronger and harder than when he left. With a look, he silenced most men." Devin laughed. "Still does. He was a stone warrior with liquid movements. While evading the assassins pursuing him, Prince Faellyn had changed his name to what we now call him: he used his middle name, Daryk, and translated his surname, Haesel-Tigth to the common tongue; obtaining his new last name--Frost.

"But, although he had matured and changed his name, Daryk Frost was quickly recognized as the Talisman prince and distrust spread out before him rather than welcomes. He went to Tolliver because Warynn and Fanydd had trespassed him upon penalty of death and because he needed to be near Whitehall. An affluent nobleman adopted the man and he and his daughter took Daryk in. Yes, you're right. Cedric and Carolyn. Donal is Cedric's brother; for a time, he served as a shaper. He's really quite good, you should hear him sometime. Well anyway, the aloof and enigmatic Talisman quickly became the main subject of gossip and scandal in the court. He cut

his hair to shoulder length and dressed in the finest clothes, yet many in the court of Tolliver called him "barbarian." After his infrequent entrances into social discussions, however, the court discovered that he was intriguingly well-read. He possessed a keen intellect and a wisdom beyond his years. He was soft-spoken and captivating, charming many of the ladies of the court. He returned no advances however, spending all his time with Carolyn."

Cassie reddened slightly, yet she wasn't sure who she was more jealous of--Carolyn or Devin.

"He became more desirable and more detestable each day. Master of many arts, respecter of no person, Daryk was envied and hated by several powerful individuals. Yet he enthralled the entire court with his adventurous past and mysterious ways. It was his wont to wear greys and silvers and was bestowed the title of the Grey Prince. Sand and scars, how he loved that!

"Often, he would simply disappear for a week, a month, whatever. Two winters past, Daryk disappeared suddenly, journeying out from Tolliver in the middle of a snow storm. He was gone for more than a year. He sent word to us often, but he hadn't even told me that he was going to be leaving. He said that he couldn't have told me because I would have insisted on going with him--which is true--and he needed to go alone. When he returned, three months ago, he was babbling of the Dark One's return to Myland and having seen the Spoiler's lieutenant in his dreams.

"He sounded crazy. Looked it too. But he wasn't and we all knew it. I felt like we had all just been waiting for him those many months. Just waiting for him to return and turn our lives upside down. Sometimes, I feel like I don't even know him anymore, and it makes me sad, I guess. But it also makes me proud. He's bigger, now. Fuller. Like the exploding mountains of the Ademan; you can feel the rumblings, the waves of power. He's larger than his bodily cage, more focused, directed..."

Devin nodded grimly, as if he were a reeve and had just uncovered a criminal. *Directed*. Yes, he liked the flavor of the word; it tasted of Daryk.

"Directed," he chewed.

Cassie smiled. She liked Devin. Whether he knew it or not, he had the same kind of intensity that Daryk had. All of them did. Oh, they could joke and tease her, but in the last two and a half weeks, Cassie had noticed how ardently they pursued their work and discussions. At first, she thought that they were so determinedly active to avoid thinking of the wounded Greyman; but now she decided that it was part of their natures. Part of what made them seem so reserved and noble when she first met them.

"Well, anyway. Where was I? Oh, yes!" Devin resumed, adopting an expansive, melodramatic speaking voice. "Then, like a spectre, the evil sorcerer--that's him--appeared in the private chamber of the beautiful Princess Cassandra Farrington--that's you--and through his magic, kidnapped her. King Mardynn frantically roused a search of Warynn and sent messengers to all the Circle kingdoms. But no one had seen the Talisman lord or his prisoner. Over two weeks passed and still no sign. People were beginning to

say that surely he had sacrificed the poor young princess and she was dead. Some said he had returned to Glendale, some said to the Crown Halls, some said to the Nortland. Some said he was dead."

He stopped, and Cassie looked up sharply. Her smile faded.

He squeezed her hand.

Some said he was dead.

"Well!" he breathed. "I suppose we'll just have to wait to see how the story ends."

THIRTEEN

Daryk Frost was in a dim, stone-hewn passage--a cave tunnel. He had been here before.

As always, he shambled down the tunnel, noting its transformation into a castle corridor, until he reached the door.

As always, he experienced the momentary confusion of finding the door locked. But then he remembered the key--the key to two doors. He fished it out of his pocket and flipped the tumblers.

For every lock there is a key.

As always, Daryk pushed open the heavy door. Heat struck him in the face. Blistering heat, yet heavy and familiar. Dumbly, he walked forward. He was in a small room, comfortably furnished. There was no fireplace, but the heat was unbearable. Daryk looked to his left. His chest constricted.

There it was. The Kommoran. The *Chained Wingdrake*. He remembered the time he saw it in Whitehall. He had thought that it was beautiful. But this wasn't Whitehall.

The cloying smell of perfume assailed his nostrils.

He looked around for some means of escape. *Where did the door go?* he wondered.

"Welcome home, Son."

Daryk turned. Immense heat struck his face.

"Thank you, Father."

Yes, it was him. He is the Black One, Nightfriend, David's Bane. The elves call him Seeker; the dwarves call him Shadowking.

But his name is Perian Silvertongue.

It may as well be Death.

"My master sends his love," Silvertongue purred.

Defiantly, Daryk smiled.

"And mine his."

Silvertongue slapped him--*hard!* Daryk flew like a ragdoll to the floor. Slowly, he lifted himself up. A fiery handprint pulsated across his cheek.

"They are one and the same," Silvertongue said affably, as if agreeing with something Daryk had said.

Daryk rubbed his blistering face but said nothing.

"It is nearing the time when we shall have need of you, my child. The day of sentence is nearing! Can you feel it, my sweet? Does it draw you? Do you want it? Because--oooh--it wants you!"

Silvertongue was obscenely close and Daryk turned the burned side of his face away from his hot breath. He could smell his hair beginning to smolder.

"But, why me?" Daryk gasped.

"Why anyone?" Silvertongue mused. "You should feel honored, my son. You merely have a...talent...that my master finds appealing. He seems to think that he can use you."

"What...what talent."

"Well, I honestly do not know! Your skill at killing, I would guess. You have quite a penchant for slaughter."

Daryk hung his head.

"Yes," he admitted. "That's true."

"How many of those fools did you destroy in the girl's chamber? Four? Is that right?"

Daryk did not answer.

"Yes, I am sure it was four," Silvertongue continued. "See? You were more than sufficient there! You slew four of the Traveller's loyal followers, you--"

"They were trying to kill her!"

"They were trying to protect her."

"They were sent by the Spoiler to--"

"By my master?" Silvertongue was incredulous. "No, they were loyal to the other...'til the end!"

"No!" Daryk felt the sweltering air closing about him. Blindly, he turned and ran.

The laughs of Perian Silvertongue chased him down the dark corridor. He pressed his hands to his ears and squeezed his eyes shut, screaming and crying.

His shins connected solidly with something and he tumbled.

Visions collided with his brain. Taunting images. Unreal and yet frighteningly vivid.

He saw himself leaping between Cassie and her betraying servant's blade. But in his dream he was never fast enough. In his dream he was always just a moment too late. And the huge Cyfordian blade plunged into her frail little body. Again and again and again.

And then he was the one with the knife. Daryk looked at it in his own hand. Glittering. Before him was the exposed back of Perian Silvertongue. He did not pause. With a yell, Daryk sank the blade into the Seeker's back again and again and again. And then he turned him over. And it wasn't Silvertongue he had killed. It was Gregory.

And he could still feel himself falling, falling...

When he crashed to a halt, he landed on his back, expelling all the air out of his lungs. The cool air closed like a vacuum around his body but he couldn't seem to force any of it down his throat into his lungs. His stomach cramped horribly and he felt like he would retch all over himself at any moment.

Eventually, he was able to sit up.

When he sat up, he did retch.

"Oh, Aan," he moaned. "What have I done!"

He was once again in the land of the Walker. He remembered the last time he had come here. Unwittingly, he had led the Adversary's masterservant right to the Walker. His shouts had been to no avail. The Walker had not heard. Daryk had tried to climb to the Walker to warn him, but he had not made it.

Daryk forced himself to gaze upon the rock where the Walker always sat. He wasn't there, now.

And the rock was spattered with blood.

His blood.

Daryk cried out and pinched himself as hard as he could.

It's just a dream!

Weeping, he approached the rock. He remembered how, in another dream--funny, how his dreams were linked chronologically, just as in his waking life--many nights ago, the Seeker had latched on to his ankle and dragged him down into the molten earth. The charred earth stretched out before the rock.

A gaping hole opened before Daryk.

He approached it warily. It looked like a festering wound, open and bloody. The ground's orifice reeked a tremendous stench and Daryk had to hold his breath in order to not throw up again. The seductive dark lured him to the edge like a siren call and he experienced an overwhelming sense of vertigo. A desire to leap into the abyss, to become one with it, to be it.

He felt his body leaning forward and he scabbled backwards away from the edge. But his frantic steps loosened the uncertain footing beneath him and the soil slid from underfoot. His feet flew from beneath him and he fell.

By luck, his hand closed on a root. It held for an instant, and then came loose.

His body was hurled into the darkness.

Finally! he thought. He would fall down the hole. Into the Blackness. To his death.

And he would fall into the Black and land in a crumpled little heap. A little pile of garbage.

And he would wait.

And eventually he would know.

He would know by which one came to claim him.

He would know to which one he belonged.

Finally.

But it didn't happen that way.

When he opened his eyes, he was in a clearing. At first, he thought he had returned to the forest of a previous dream. But he was mistaken.

He saw a figure before him dressed in shining white and at first he thought he was in the Homeland and this was an Aamon. But then the brilliancy faded and he noticed the travel stains on the clothing and the haggard expression on the man's face.

It was a familiar face. The face of a friend and a tutor.

Soon to be the face of a dead man...

FOURTEEN

Eanderthall the Paladin trembled. There was no time to pray; there was no time to prepare; there was no time to turn back. Sighing, he began to enumerate his weaknesses and ask for their riddance.

Here was his destiny.

Quite possibly, his death.

He stood in a small clearing, no more than twenty feet across. The few beams of sunlight that managed to struggle through the dense overhanging canopy were all but strangled with floating motes of dust. They looked to Eanderthall like columns of faerie dust supporting the forest roof.

He had been travelling through the Sablen for nearly a week, now. The going had been slow. Several times he had found it necessary to double back for miles when he could cut through the underbrush no more. The woods seemed alive--evil, sentient--and many times the Paladin wanted nothing more than to run back the way he came, over the Shield Mountains and out of the Nortland forever. But that was not the Worldshaper's plan. Yes, here was where he needed to be. Eanderthall could feel it about to happen, too. Whatever it was. He had been *dream-screaming* again. The Walker was always there; but he no longer spoke to Eanderthall. That scared the warrior. Actually, it *terrified* him. Last night, the Walker had not come at all. This morning, he had awakened and continued his northeasterly trek, believing that his journey was near its conclusion. He had been right. When he traveled, he did so alone, on foot, using neither mount nor a beast of burden.

Yet he was not alone now.

Opposite him, enshrouded in the darkness of the tenebrous wood, crouched a still figure--a shadow itself--that looked like a man. Or a statue, for as motionless as it remained.

Warily, Eanderthall unsheathed his glittering blade.

Like a mirror, the black-thing freed its own weapon. The sword sparkled before the warrior, in sharp contrast to its background.

A gasp escaped Eanderthall's lips. It was more a sigh of resignation than of surprise; yes, he had expected this. He had feared it.

The broadsword Eanderthall's opponent wielded was the sister to his own weapon.

When Eanderthall had been chosen to bear the One's mission on earth over eight years ago, he had been given *Ithylain*, the blade wielded by the Paladin--according to legend--for nearly nine

hundred years. In Elvish, its name means "white blade." It was one of the four swords forged by Llerand Lley of the faerie folk for the Four Dragonriders of Aan. Legend had it that the swords would be brandished again by the Riders when Aan came to take his people away to his Homeland.

No one believed legend much anymore. Llerand Lley's people were gone; the dragons were gone; two of the swords had been corrupted by evil; three of the four had been lost; and Aan was dead. No one believed.

Well, almost no one.

Eanderthall believed. And he was scared.

Eanderthall was supposedly the Champion of Aan. But the Dark One also has a Warrior-disciple.

He is called Daevlyn Temyn, but was not always.

His name had been Kaene. He had been a member of the Regent Council of Whitehall. He had been very powerful. But that was when he was merely a man; now he was immeasurably more powerful, his soul immeasurably more lost.

Why multiple names?

Almost ten years ago, he had left the Circle Lands and ventured north. It was rumored that he had thrown in league with Perian Silvertongue. Some said that he had gone mad, some said that he had become enlightened. There is, no doubt, some truth in both these accounts. Somewhere along his travels, he found, stole or was given *Tarilayn*, the Queen-sword of the Four. Like the Kingblade, it was considerably larger than *Ithylain*--and potentially more lethal. A few months back, the sword and the Dark Servant had both disappeared. Some speculated that he had gone to aid or kill the Grey Prince, who had also disappeared. No one knew for certain where he was or what he was doing.

But Eanderthall did.

Now.

He lowered his blade and waited.

"I am stronger," the Dark Servant's voice scuttled like leaves across the packed earth. The hairs on Eanderthall's neck stood at attention.

"I am sorry," he returned.

Daevlyn Temyn peered at him.

"We need not fight," he told the Paladin.

Eanderthall's brows knit.

"I am afraid we must."

"That is not Aan's will," the black warrior hissed. "What type of man seeks the destruction of another? I do not wish to quarrel with you. I merely seek your aid. We should be allies. We pursue the same end, do we not? I want peace amongst the lands, you want peace amongst the lands."

"You serve the Spoiler's vassal," Eanderthall answered. "Your peace is nothing other than slavery."

"I serve Aan. For does the Tome not say, 'His hand moves all things, yea, even the air and the rocks and the waters?' I am just a tool of his; or do you not believe the History of the Walker?"

"You twist his words."

"Do I? 'And pride shall be your destruction.' Are you so

proud to believe that only you can know his will? Do you think that you are the only one that has the dreams? Oh, yes! I know of them. You are so vain! Look at what is happening! I am dreaming the dreams. I am walking the land! He comes and talks with me! When was the last time he spoke with you? you refuse to acknowledge the obvious. You are not the true Paladin, you fool. I am. Who has the strongest of the Blades? I do. Tarilayn rules over Ithylain. I rule over you. Do you not see that? The King-blade has been lost for ages. The Queen-sword rules, as it is written."

"You have perverted the blade to the service of evil," Eanderthall half-shouted. "You are my enemy."

"Love your enemies," Daevlyn Temyn quoted. "'For they the authors of your fate.'"

Eanderthall could see where the discussion was headed.

"The Dark One is Aan's enemy." Temyn whispered speciously. "I am simply doing as the Tome says and loving him."

The Paladin said nothing.

"Join me."

"No."

The Dark Servant began to approach the Paladin.

"Join me."

"My friend, my life has been dedicated to his truth. Even the Silvertongue's rhetoric could not sway me to alter my direction."

"Join me," Daevlyn Temyn urged. "And all you ever wished for shall be yours. You can have whatever you want. You can build great temples to Aan--like those which used to exist."

Eanderthall smiled.

His destiny was here.

"No."

"Join me, and there will be no more war; no more division; no more struggle. It is your responsibility."

"No."

"Join me."

"No."

The Dark Servant was less than five feet away.

His destiny was here.

The Paladin suddenly knew what was required of him. He did not know why he had to do it, but he did not question the motives of Aan. He was an exacting god, an uncompromising god.

Eanderthall threw himself forward onto the Queen-blade.

Sometimes he was a bloody god.

Daevlyn Temyn hissed in surprise. He tried to pull away but it was too late. Tarilayn had already slipped through the Paladin and was becoming drunk on his blood. The Dark Servant cursed. He was supposed to take the Paladin alive.

"You fool!"

Eanderthall smiled at him.

"It would seem so."

Then his lids fluttered and he was gone. The Queen-blade was finally released and the Servant wrenched it from the Paladin's body. It felt strangely heavy. Unwieldy. He looked down at the

Paladin's still form. He kicked him.

"You fool!" he repeated, kicking him again and again until he was gasping for breath. "Fool, fool, fool, fool, fool..."

Careful not to touch it, he wrapped the fallen warrior's blade in a cloak and fixed it to his mount's saddle.

Then he turned and left the clearing and the Paladin's empty body. He did not look back.

In some indescribable way, he felt that he had lost; and that Aan was laughing at him.

FIFTEEN

The two men stood silent and still.

Both were visiting their own private realms. One, lost in the world of genius; the other, lost in the world of madness.

The worlds were very much alike.

But the men were very different.

One was old and bent, the other young and straight. One, cowed and broken, the other proud and defiant.

Yet, they seemed merely different translations of the same person. A young version and an old version. If the old man could have walked backwards through time to his youth, he would have looked very much like the young man.

But it doesn't work that way.

There are no yesterdays. Only sad, half-forgotten stories; lies, really--because no one ever remembers things right, so they just make up their recollections as they wish things had been.

Shannon Lore expected that Alric Eldarman didn't do much remembering. Which was just as well. It would be cruel to make the man compare his present self to what he used to be.

But, then again, it was a cruel world.

Lore had been observing the mute statues for nearly twenty minutes. Reynald was late--as usual--and the proceedings could not begin without him. Lore supposed it was the Master-regent's way of letting every one see how indispensable he was.

Lore thought it was childish.

But it gave him more time to view the soon-to-be-defendants: his one-time master beside his one-time student. He wondered if he truly didn't belong out there with them.

Alric was dressed in the white and blue robes of the Magi. He no longer carried the staff of his station; it lay before him on the barren flagstones. His feet were bare, his beard matted and dirty. Occasionally, he would mutter under his breath, "Rongarth...Rongarth. I can smell the serpents, my son. Don't call the serpents."

But for the most part he kept silent. His mumblings were ignored by most as the loose ramblings of a madman.

Shannon Lore knew better.

Rongarth had been an Apprentice Erudite about the time of the legendary King David. He had tremendous skill in necromancy and promised to be one of the finest sorcerers of the age.

But he became impatient in his quest for power. He attempted to usurp his master through arcane means--a type of magical vampirism which sucked all the skill of the master into the

student.

His enchantment worked, but the influx of power had been too much for him. He lost control. According to legend, the Serpents of the Pit came forth from their netherworld and consumed Rongarth and his hapless master. No one ever heard from them ever again.

Of course it was just a moral story: don't mess with things you don't understand; don't betray your masters; don't let ambition lead you astray. That kind of thing.

But to Shannon, it meant a great deal more. It was an accusation. He had betrayed Alric. He had called the snakes.

Alric had always purported that the tale was based on truth. Whenever Shannon's ambition had shown through, his old master used to chide him, "Patience, my young Rongarth. Patience."

Even though the platform the men stood on was encased in a magical bubble, and the captors could not see their judges, every time Alric murmured the name Rongarth, he looked straight at Shannon Lore. It was disquieting.

But now Alric stood still and silent beside the budding wizard, Marc Todd.

Todd did not wear the traditional robes of the Magi as Alric did, but he was carrying his staff. His full, short beard was styled in the manner of the guildsmen. His garments were the plain greys of the weaponsmakers, his friends. He had been trying to convince the Magi that they should pursue the lost art of enchanting weapons. They were as yet unconvinced.

Yet each day he worked in the forge alongside the smiths, attempting to rediscover the ancient art of weaponry. Thus far he had experienced no success with blades but had managed to produce some bows of surpassing quality.

Not that it mattered now.

Shannon predicted that he would no longer be working his magic in the forges. Or anywhere else for that matter.

He turned as the door behind him opened quietly.

Reynald Tym-Waltyr entered, regally adorned in his Master-regent's cloak and carrying the staff of his office. He was a thin man. He had swarthy skin and black hair. He had a widow's peak in the center of his high forehead and a point to his beard. His nose was too big; his eyes too small. They were the amber eyes of a beast. A hunter. He had a mean face. Roughly hewn like a poorly cut diamond, it reminded Shannon of an eroded cliff face, sharply carved by wind and rain. And it was a face that revealed about as much as a rock cliff face.

But Shannon swore he saw murder in Reynald's eyes.

Behind him came his sycophant cronies: the bullish Barris Kall and the sneering Damen Trasher.

Kall was a barrel-chested bully who had been lucky enough to have been born with the gift. He had been using his magic to scare children and rob adults when Reynald had discovered him. In many ways, he was still just a common thief.

Trasher was a different story. As a Magus, he was good. Unfortunately, he knew it. And he was handsome, in a roguish sort of way. His arrogance and vanity irked Lore beyond measure. Yet,

both he and Kall were formidable--and dangerous.

To Shannon's consternation, Aryssa Farr also followed Tym-Walter into the Sundering Room. Unlike the two others, Lore had a great amount of respect for Aryssa. She was quite powerful and had been a strong ally of his. She did not like him, he knew that, but she supported him. *Had* supported him. Now, it looked like she had gone over to the other camp. Not that Shannon really blamed her. His side was beginning to look pretty sorry.

To his left sat the ever loyal Tarrel Faste, a weak Somatic Lord who made up for his ineptitude through his unlimited and selfless service. He was a soft, gelatinous mass of a man who had almost no initiative to speak of. He liked to talk of his grand schemes, but never seemed to actually follow through on any of them. He was an excellent follower, however, which was exactly what Lore needed at this moment. He was reliable and dedicated and honest. And despite how annoying he could be, he was also Shannon's friend.

On Lore's right, rigidly attentive, sat Korrey Dayl, the Healer. As a Magus, she was competent and dependable. Not awe-inspiring, but what Healers were? She did her job, she never needed help and she didn't complain. She took her post very seriously and performed her duties with a reverential formality.

As an individual, she was an utter delight. She was a beautiful young woman who somehow didn't recognize her beauty. She was thin and dark, with shoulder-length chestnut hair. When she wasn't working in a professional capacity, she teased and flirted with her friends like a maid. Often, the jokes she played were on herself for the entertainment of her close associates. Shannon was glad to be counted among them. Tarrel would have died for her. As a matter of fact, there was no one Faste loved and worshipped more, except for Lore himself.

Whenever the Council was required at a social event--which was increasingly more often--she decorated Lore's arm. She was a wonderful lady. She was his best friend.

But she was still just a Healer. And Healers and Somatic Lords were not regarded as highly as Erudite Lords and Elementals. Once again, the reason for this was power.

Intrinsic Magi--Healers and Somatics--draw upon an internal source. Thus, they are quite limited in their magic. During times of war, Healers are greatly valued because one cannot serve an entire army. They become weak after only a few healings and need to rest, so the more Healers in the service of a host, the better. It was not unheard of for the more dedicated Healers to sacrifice themselves for the lives of the soldiers, working well beyond their endurance and dying for their patients.

And while Somatic Lords--the most abundant of the Magi--are often summarily ordered to effect their sorcery, Healers receive at least a kind of deferred respect. Perhaps that is because their discipline is so integrally tied to human existence; or perhaps it is because they are more limited in their powers and less ominous to the populace.

The Council of Regents was historical in nature and formed

from a long tradition of regency. Four High Kings have been recorded as having regents. In the time before the Great War, when Thaeron II was a child, a Healer named Geoff LeBruse announced that he was going to cast his staff for the Master-regency. It was unheard of. In a staff-tilt, a Healer lost nearly by default. Healers could perform no wizardry for arcane combat, so anyone--even the weakest Somatic--could have easily defeated LeBruse and become the Master-regent. All anyone had to do was to challenge him.

No one did. LeBruse served until the heir-apparent was old enough to mount the steps to the Throne and then returned to the stronghold of the Healers in the east. He was said to have been one of the greatest of the Master-regents, perhaps because he did not have great magical prowess. Nor did he seek power. He sought fairness and he sought to prepare the prince for his duties. His only ambition, it seemed, was to serve.

Perhaps remembrances of the Healer Master-regent gain the Healers a little respect. Perhaps people simply see in their nature, like LeBruse's, a desire to serve.

Healers have no spells of attack; they are strong only in aiding another overcome his weakness. So Healers are not regarded as wholly inferior, but they are not feared. Reynald Tym-Waltyr was feared.

Extrinsic Lords--Erudites and Elementals--derive their power from outside sources: Elementals from their physical surroundings and Erudites from incantations, periapts, baubles, staves or just about anything charged. Thus--hypothetically at least--the power of an Extrinsic is unlimited. Of course, the learning involved was extensive and the physical exhaustion that accompanies casting limits the Magus considerably. Still, the Extrinsic is always strong; much stronger than the Intrinsic.

Shannon noted grimly that the two wizards that were his allies were merely Intronics while Tym-Waltyr had three Extronics among him and only one Intrinsic.

This did nothing to ease Shannon's mind.

Today seemed destined to be the day that would ruin him politically in Whitehall. His only hope lay in Gerard Tohl, the Elemental from Vandorae. The man was a wildcard. No one knew where he stood on any given issue. He was polite and sociable but objectively impartial. Apparently he was undecided on the matter of the sundering. He seemed to be reserving judgement until the trial itself.

If Shannon could somehow sway his vote, then there would be a tie--a dead-lock--and the only other member of the Council of Regents would be required to vote.

That member was Alric.

If Shannon could force Tym-Waltyr into declaring the tie, then he would win...for now. No doubt the old fox would bring up the issue again later.

Lore had really been lucky. He had persuaded Gerard Tohl--in the essence of time, of course--to call the two cases to be heard together and not separately. Tohl, the order-keeper, agreed. That

would be in Lore's favor: the Elemental would be reticent to damn both sorcerers when Todd was showing such promise. True, according to the letter of the law, the young man should not be allowed to serve as a Savant Lord. But there were extenuating circumstances.

Lore just hoped Tohl saw it that way.

He was a large man, with a full body and a full beard. His size was unremarkable in Vandorae, but in the rest of the Circle Lands, he was a giant. His Magus robes rustled regally about him. Of all the Regents, Shannon knew the least about him.

And now, he was the crux.

Reynald Tym-Waltyr had settled into his seat.

"Well. now," he said, not bothering to apologize for his tardiness. "Are we about ready to begin?"

Everyone murmured assent.

"Then let's get on with it; I've other business to attend to this morning."

Lore smiled disdainfully, catching the subtle implication.

"Please drop the shield, Gerard. But do not allow them to see us; keep them blind for now."

"Yes, Reynald," Tohl's basso voice answered.

There was a *whooshing* sound and the two subjects looked up expectantly. Todd was gazing off to the right of the assembled Magi but Alric stared right at Lore.

"Alric Eldarman, Marc Todd," Tym-Waltyr began. "You have been deemed unfit to serve as Magi in the Circle Lands. You have appeared to our number to be lacking in the basic skills and precepts required to serve our people arcanelly. If found deficient, you will renounce your pursuit of the arts and resign yourself to a calling more to your nature."

Shannon Lore looked at him sharply.

"You mean to ask Marc to quit magic altogether? A young man with his promise? Surely you won't, Reynald."

"Reynald," Korrey came to Shannon's aid. "You cannot mean to deprive--"

"If he passes the tests he has nothing to worry about," the Master-regent answered implacably.

"But Reynald--"

"No discussion!" Gerard Tohl reminded them.

Lore settled uneasily back into his seat. It was dictated that no discussion take place after the sensory shield was lifted. It forced each member to decide his verdict alone--outside the reach of another's persuasion. Questions could be asked, but the order-keeper could stop even those if it got out of hand. In cases such as this one, Gerard's position became a very influential one.

Reynald Tym-Waltyr turned his murderous gaze back on the defendants.

"You have heard the charge. Alric Eldarman, what say you?"

The old man peered up and chuckled. For a moment, Shannon thought he saw a glint of that sharp, ironic wit he used to admire so much in the Magus. Then it was gone.

He spoke, voice crackling from the years caught in his throat,

"I would have built you a cottage
In the woods, not far from here;
A place forever warm with love,
A world with nothing to fear.

"The deer would come, not frightened
To view the one of my love,
And in the morning you would waken
To the pealing of a dove.

"The sleep upon your eyes so blue--no, yellow
Would depart with the morning mist
And you'd wake to see my loving face
My hand on the cheek just...licked? No, that's not it."

Tarrel Faste stifled a giggle.

Tym-Waltyr's face went hard, but Lore was sure he saw a certain amount of pleasure in those amber eyes. Satisfaction. The gloating pride of a job well-done. Was Tym-Waltyr proud of the fact that he had driven the once-great man to this? Lore realized with disgust that he was.

"Alric Eldarman, I ask you again: what say you?"
The old man sing-songed,

"In my mind's eye, here I do see
An ancient and glorious prophecy--
A girl or a woman, neither and both
In golden dream wherein she quoth:

"'End to an end and of the age
Comes to an end when comes a young sage
Who dresses in a lady's gown
And catches the Regent with his breeches down--'"

"Very well," Reynald interrupted him, ignoring Faste's guffaws. "Under the order of the rite, we must provide you with the opportunity to prove your competence to the Council. First, you must perform a simple act to assure us that you indeed have the capacity for magic at all. Then, you must perform a magic according to your personal discipline to convince us that you are of the quality of a Magus."

Alric babbled contentedly to himself, ignoring the Master-regent. Angrily, Tym-Waltyr raised his voice.

"For the first--the Confirmation--we request you work the simple magic of lighting the candle before you. This is the basest of magics; enact it...now!"

Alric said nothing. He had stopped babbling and was chewing determinedly on what had once been his hat.

Tym-Waltyr smiled almost imperceptively.

"Alric Eldarman," he said quietly. "Light the candle."

At first, Shannon was sure that the old man hadn't heard. Then, just as Reynald was about to speak again, Alric started, as if awakening from a dream, and shuffled over to one of the walls. Lifting his battered cap to one of the torches, he drenched it in the flames. It dripped fire as he walked back to the candle. He held the cap gingerly before him, trying not to spill the flames. Holding it to the tiny candle, he poured the flickering libation into the candle.

He then beat out the hat's blaze and placed the smoldering cap on his lowered head. Shannon smiled wryly.

For a moment, at least, the old Alric had returned.

"Very well," Tym-Waltyr said.

He muttered a few words and the flame winked out.

"Marc Todd," he addressed the young man. "You know what is required of you, do you not?"

"I do." Todd's voice was neutral.

"You understand the consequences of failure?"

"Yes, Tym-Waltyr." No title, Shannon noted. He knew that Marc had already resigned himself to losing his position. He was not going to lose his dignity, too.

"You know what we require?"

"I do."

Tym-Waltyr nodded.

"Light the candle."

Without a moment's hesitation, Todd began to murmur words of summoning. The air within the open chamberroom crackled with latent energy that was beginning to awake. Shannon could feel the hair raise on the back of his neck. Korrey rose a little in her seat and Tarrel uttered a mild curse.

Something's wrong, Shannon thought. He's drawing in a tremendous amount of power. He's going to lose control of it.

Gerard began to chant the rite of sealing.

But it was going to be too late. Todd's behemoth was about to be unleashed on the Council. A phosphorescent wall sprang up in front of Tarrel and Korrey, the plump Somatic pulling her to him in order to protect her.

But Marc Todd never lost control.

A tremendous shadow grew behind him and began to pulse and bubble and metamorphose; congealing into a hulking but unmistakable shape.

"A wingdrake!" Aryssa breathed in wonder.

The dragon was big; its charcoal tail coiled around Marc Todd like a charred and curling parchment.

Shannon had heard of the Maguses of old invoking the legendary wingdrakes to aid them in battle, but he had never come across a spell that would summon them. He had searched the archives of Whitehall to no avail, finally deciding that such stories were just that--stories, and that there was no such spell of summoning. Yet here was this young Magus--a man about to be dismissed from the Craft for his lack of skill!--commanding one of the monsters to his side.

Yet the creature was not exactly a wingdrake. It was composed entirely out of shadows, not flesh. Its glowing orbs were the only points of light that penetrated the gloomy form. It was enormous, filling up half of the Sundering Room. And the wingdrake--shadowdrake?--was still growing.

Seconds before Gerard could complete the rite of sealing, the maw of the creature gaped open, revealing a burning inferno. Instantly, Shannon's magical shields flew up. But he wasn't sure if even he could withstand a direct attack from the wingdrake. There was a *whooshing* sound as the beast expelled its fiery breath. Shannon tried to reinforce his protection, but couldn't remember the incantation. He had never been in a real battle of the arcane. In his fright, his mind had gone blank.

He watched helplessly as the gout of flame spilled onto the flagstones. The fire's intensity increased until the very seats the Regents were sitting on became uncomfortable.

Here it comes, Shannon thought.

The heat continued building, building, building...then began to recede. The shadows began to dissolve as if the clouds were retreating from the closed, high ceilinged chamber. The incorporeal shadowdrake melted, leaving only Alric and Todd on the floor below the Regents.

Then Shannon saw it.

The tiny, humble flame defiantly twinkling atop the half-melted little candle.

* * * * *

Daryk Frost cried out in his sleep.

Cassie looked up from her book, *Symmian's Out of the Boundless*. He cried out again. She put the book down and sat down beside him on the bed.

He shook violently for a full minute.

Then, weakly but distinctly, he laughed.

Puzzled, Cassie waited for something more, but the Greyman merely settled deeper into sleep's embrace.

The elves call sleep *camatlan*, "the dream-home" or "place of dreams." But the word also conveys a meaning of peace and forgetfulness.

Cassie didn't think that the Greyman had achieved peace or forgetfulness. His sleep had been troubled and fitful.

But he had just laughed for the first time. Maybe that was a good sign. Maybe he was getting better.

Maybe.

Then why did it make the hairs on her neck stand up?

* * * * *

There was utter silence in the Sundering Room.

Marc Todd could have killed most of the Magi with his summoned shadowdrake. He had made that perfectly clear. He did not harm them.

But he had the power...

"Marc Todd," Reynald addressed him with a remarkably steady voice. "You have just demonstrated your lack of responsibility and innate recklessness. Yet you still have not performed the act of minor magic we have requested from you."

Shannon turned to look at Reynald. He wanted to see the man's lips; he couldn't believe his hearing.

Todd was a stone, "I have lit the candle, Reynald."

"Please, sirrah," Reynald's voice had an almost bored sound to it. "Without the theatrics."

Todd's jaw muscles tensed beneath his beard.

"I cannot."

"Then you have failed the Confirmation," Reynald declared. "Gerard, shield them and we shall vote."

Sighs of protest were expelled and Korrey looked at Reynald angrily, but no one challenged the verdict openly.

Gerard shielded the defendants and lifted the Book of Records to his lap. He read slowly, purposefully.

"Alric al-Thyman Eldarman, Marcus Aurellius Todd have been charged with arcane incompetence. They have been judged to be of a level not befitting that of a Staff Lord. Both have failed to satisfactorily perform the Confirmation and await judgement of sentence. Roll vote; Sundering or Lowering."

Before Gerard could begin the voting, Shannon blurt out, "Point of information!"

"Granted."

"Are the punishments bound together? Is the declaration for one the same for the other?"

"Unless the Council declares otherwise."

Gerard studied Shannon.

"I now open the floor for a motion to split the judgements," he rumbled, eyeing Shannon and Reynald.

Tarrel was about to speak but Shannon laid a hand on his arm. Gerard nodded. The strategies of Reynald and Shannon were in the open now. Both were going all or nothing. It was a risk on both sides. If Shannon lost the gamble, not only would Alric and Todd be stripped of their Robes, but he would lose politically. He saw Korrey cross her fingers.

"Seeing no such motion," Gerard said. "We shall begin the judgement. Reynald Tym-Waltyr."

"Sundering."

"Aryssa Farr."

"Sundering."

Shannon groaned inwardly. He had been hoping that Aryssa would choose to only lower the wizards. Now his only hope lay in Gerard. As order-keeper, he would vote last.

"Shannon Lore."

"Lowering."

"Damen Trasher"

"Sundering."

Three to one.

"Korrey Dayl."

"Lowering."

Three to two.

"Tarrel Faste."

"Lowering!"

Tied.

"Barris Kall."

"Sundering."

Everyone turned to Gerard. His vote was needed to tie the vote. If he even abstained, the men would be sundered. His head remained lowered over the records. Shannon could hear his breathing. No one spoke.

A sickening feeling pawed Shannon's heart with its clammy hands. He felt certain that he had misjudged the man. He was going to doom the two to a life without magic.

Sure, he was a just man and would not allow a young man of promise to be shuffled off to another profession; but he was also a realist. Todd's magotechnic display was not only reckless and irresponsible, it was frightening. Along with the fear came the sober revelation that the upstart Magi was already powerful enough to summon well beyond the abilities of the Council. What if he decided one day that he could rule Whitehall better than the Council? Who could stop him? By sundering him, the Council would make it illegal for him to practice the art in any of the Circle Lands. Shannon guiltily realized his own trepidation and suspicion of Todd. Maybe he should be sundered.

Gerard rubbed the crown of his nose.

"As for me," he said. "Lowering."

On either side of Lore, pent up air escaped in twin sighs. Shannon saw Korrey nodding happily and heard Tarrel's grinning exclamation.

Shannon Lore's smile was more ironic. He wondered if they were celebrating the precursor to their own downfall.

"What?" Reynald's tone betrayed a hint of anger. "A tie? We cannot have a tie. Order-keeper, how do we resolve the issue? You may vote to make or break a tie; if a tie is created, a second vote is taken and you may not vote more than once on the same issue, correct?"

It really wasn't a question and Shannon nearly laughed aloud at Reynald's expression of disbelief when Gerard answered him.

"No."

"No?"

Tarrel giggled.

"The last member must decide the vote."

"The last member?"

The look on Reynald's face was one that Shannon would treasure for a lifetime. He finally saw what was coming.

"Yes, the last member," Gerard said. "Alric."

Tarrel clapped his hands in delight and Korrey turned her head to hide her smile.

"Alric?" Barris cried. "That's ridiculous! He's the one on trial! He cannot be called upon to judge himself!"

"Now is not the time to amend the proceedings," Gerard stated. "We must allow the final member a vote if he be available. He is available; he will vote."

"Preposterous!"

"Ridiculous!"

"Of all the..."

Amid the barrage of insults and indignation, Shannon thought he felt Aryssa's calculating gaze fall upon him with a new respect. He wasn't certain, but merely the thought was nice.

Implacably, Reynald fumed, but Gerard was unmoved.

After much of the tumult died, he asked, "Are we ready for the shield to be lowered?"

"Alric may not have a vote!" Reynald raged, his earlier composure shattered. "I will not allow it! I--"

"You!" Gerard countered quietly but forcefully. "You have no say, m'lord. I am the order-keeper: it is the way. We will lower the shield, now. Alric will vote."

The order-keeper had spoken. There was no discussion.

Again, the *hiss-whump!* struck the faces of the Regents as the magical barrier of air opened.

Todd looked upwards for the verdict; he was still unable to see the members of the Council, so he was gazing slightly above them. Alric stared straight at Shannon Lore.

"Alric Eldarman," Gerard addressed the bent old man. "You are called upon to render judgment in this matter. Please bring forth all your wisdom and ascertain the best recourse: sundering or lowering?"

Marc Todd stared upwards in disbelief as Tohl matter-of-factly asked Alric to decide his own fate.

Alric only giggled to himself.

Then he began to hum.

Shannon recognized the tune as a low seasonal lay by Marlough: it bid the young maidens to leave their worries for the irresponsibility of young love. The old man's voice was gruff but pleasant.

"Come live with me and be my love
In the valley, by the lake,
Beneath the shining stars above
Let us of our pleasures take.
To spend our days a-wondering
 a-wandering, a-warbling;
To spend our days a-summering

together by the lake.

"Come live with me and be my love
And we shall all our strength forsake;
And no more bauble, fiery glove
Or majestic dragon shall I make.
Ah, to spend my days a-womaning
no summoning, no conjuring;
Ah, thanking my a-sundering,
I join the shadowed drake."

Shannon felt the evil chill creep into his spine as the words filled the chamber. He had lost the gamble, betrayed by a madman's song. And yet he felt that Alric knew exactly what he was singing-what he was doing.

"Very well, then," Gerard rumbled. "Sundering."

Shannon felt as if all the air had suddenly been forced out of his body; he could not draw a breath.

Numbly, Shannon felt Korrey take his hand. *Just for show...just for show*, he thought stupidly. Healers cannot work the magic necessary for a sundering; it was just for show.

Tarrel took his other hand as the members of the Council linked themselves together.

"Just for show," Shannon said dazedly.

He did not take part in the sundering.

It began as a half-heard hum, but it grew in pitch and volume until it was an almost deafening scream.

The sundering.

Perhaps the two words most feared by apprentice Magi. Most hated by aging Masters. Lore prayed that he would never have to undergo the sundering. It would be like splitting with his heart. He didn't think he could bear it.

Alric had begun sobbing below. Above the frenetic howl of the incantation, Shannon thought he heard the name, "Rongarth" being said. He longed to press his hands to his ears and close his eyes against the rite. But he couldn't. Korrey and Tarrel trapped his hands like manacles.

And it was his duty to watch.

Hairline fractures of light appeared along the lengths of the two staves. The glowing fissures grew until the entire surfaces were aflame. Alric's staff was lying on the stones beneath him. It collapsed into a puddle of ash.

Marc Todd still held his, despite the obvious discomfort it afforded him. Gently, like falling rose petals, ashen pieces floated to the ground. To Shannon, it seemed unreal.

Then Marc Todd was holding nothing.

It was over.

Shannon leapt up and fled the chamber, leaving the rest of the Council to finish without him.

Yet the corridors seemed to weep as he ran through them, crying out, "Rongarth! Rongarth! Why have you betrayed me?"

SIXTEEN

Daryk Frost was in a dim, stone-hewn passage--a cave tunnel. How many times had he been here? He felt he could count out the days of his life on the flagstones. He almost expected to spend the rest of his existence wandering this place.

But tonight was somehow different.

He noticed the heat first. Rivulets of sweat trickled down his back. Pausing, he noted that the tunnel had changed: it was rougher, larger, cut from molten rock.

Realization struck and Daryk spun around. He was here; Daryk could feel him.

"Welcome home, my son."

Daryk recoiled from the words.

"Thank you, Father." He hated himself for the words.

"We are in need of you, my child," the silky voice said.

Daryk finally saw him, bright and resplendent, leaning casually against the wall. Daryk licked his lips.

"And if I refuse?"

Silvertongue approached him. Disinterestedly, Daryk saw the sleeves of his own tunic burst into flame. The masterservant of the Adversary pressed his lips to Daryk's and held them there. Daryk held his breath, but finally had to gasp for air. Fluid fire filled his being. His insides raging, Daryk fell away from the Shadowking. He opened his mouth to scream, but made no noise. Silvertongue looked down at him with a sardonic smile.

"You cannot refuse. It is too late."

"I do refuse!" Daryk cried. "You can't make me do anything! I am not your toy! I am a man!"

"Why, my child," the Black One responded. "I am your creator. You are in my dream."

"No!" That scared Daryk.

The serpent laughed--serpent?--and said, "I have created you and you have given your soul back to me, remember?"

Abruptly, Daryk realized that the ledge he had been standing on was crumbling. He fell. Down. Down. Down. He closed his eyes and waited for impact. When none came, he reopened his eyes. He was standing.

Before him was a woman--he could not see her body, only her face, but he knew she was nude--standing about four inches away. She smelled good. Her eyes were a shocking green with what appeared to be purplish flecks. Her hair was long and luxuriant, a rich, liquid brown. Her skin was light--almost white. Her lips were full, her nose delicate. Her voice was low and alluring, her breath sweet.

"Greetings, Daryk Frost. You have done well. We are pleased with you and your devotion."

"But I have failed." he heard his answer.

"Not yet." She smiled kindly. "We still have need of you, if you are willing."

"Are you...are you Aan?"

She shook her head. "No, but I suppose I serve him."

"Then I am willing, I guess."

"There is a child of God who needs you. He is in Whitehall. You must go to him."

"But, I am dead."

"Do you wish to be?"

"No, m'lady."

"Then you are not."

She kissed him.

Daryk Frost awoke. He was lying upon a plush, soft bed, covered with blankets. Beside him in a Jarric-chair, sat a young woman. The fire in the hearth spit embers indolently onto the bare flagstones. He tried to rise but could not. The woman, seeing him moving turned to help him.

"Ssssh. Quiet, dear. You are safe." She eased some bitter liquid down his throat. "You will be fine, trust me."

"Not if you keep giving me that to drink."

She giggled happily.

There was something about her voice. No, it couldn't be, could it? She lifted his chin and viewed him skeptically. Her eyes were the color of emeralds.

It was the woman in the dream!

"Hello, Daryk Frost." she soothed. "I think you know me, m'lord--you went gallivanting through Warynn to rescue me--but we haven't been formally introduced. My name is Cassandra Farrington. I believe I owe you my life."

SEVENTEEN

"Is this a dream?"

Cassandra giggled, "Of course not."

"But--" Daryk was still half-entangled in slumber's arms. "You are the woman of my dream."

The princess burst into laughter. "Why, thank you."

"No, that's not what I meant."

Daryk's eyes kept closing. The warmth of the blankets pressed comfortably down upon him. He felt that he needed to pinch himself, didn't he? He did need to wake up. No, she had just said that he was awake--or was that a dream, too? He yawned hugely.

"See," Cassandra pointed. "That proves it. This is real."

"Why do you say that?" Daryk murmured sleepily.

"Well, you don't yawn in your dreams."

Daryk considered that a moment. Finally, he nodded. "I guess that makes sense."

"More sense than you have been making, m'lord, I promise you."

"Why, what have I said?" Daryk tried to lift his head, but only succeeded in making the room spin more.

"You have been babbling about all sorts of odd things. Going to Whitehall, seeing the Paladin, something called a Kommoran, keys, walking, the girl with the eyes--now isn't that foolish? Have you ever seen a girl without eyes?"

Daryk chuckled.

"I believe I was speaking of you, m'lady."

A peculiar expression scampered across Cassandra's face.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing." The princess crossed to the large, arched window. Outside, darkness pressed the glass. "What did you mean, m'lord, when you said you would not bow to this world's ruler?"

Daryk only shook his head slowly.

"You said, 'I will not bow, I will not rule! This is not your dream. I am alone.' What did you mean?"

"I don't remember."

"Truly? What of when you said, 'Forgive me, Sire. She was never mine to claim. It's my fault. It's my fault.' What were you dreaming?"

"Was I dreaming?" he asked unconcernedly. "How long have I slept? It's still dark; has morning not come yet?"

"Are you serious?"

Her tone opened his eyes. She was looking at him intently.

"My lord, you have been asleep for twenty-four days!"

Twenty-four days!

Daryk's bed rocked sickly, like a tempest-tossed vessel on an unfriendly sea. His heart lurched wildly within him.

Twenty-four days!

"Oh! Here, drink." The princess eased another cupful of the noxious fluid down Daryk's throat. The room settled back down to rest where it belonged, but Daryk's head still throbbed dully. The drink left a bad taste in his mouth. He wondered what it was.

"You know, Cassie," Daryk groaned sourly, trying to scrape the taste from his tongue. "I'm beginning to regret rescuing you more and more each moment; each swallow."

The drink must have been laced with something. Daryk heard Cassandra's joyful, unabashed, child-like laugh.

That was the last thing he remembered.

Soft oblivion nestled down beside him and he slept once more.

* * * * *

Princess Cassandra breathed a sigh of relief. Gradually, her heart began to resume a slow, steady beat. She looked down at her hands. They were shaking. She quickly placed the glass Daryk drank from on the nearby bed-table before it could slip from her trembling fingers.

Daryk fell deeper and deeper into the dreamworld's embrace, his body rejoicing in the moment's respite. Cassandra brushed the curls back away from his handsome face and stroked his cheek. He was so pale. Amadis, the old healer from Devlin, said that never again would Daryk be able to hold anything heavier than a kitten in his left hand--it was likely that never again would he be able to use his left arm at all.

Because of her.

The princess wondered if that was why she felt the way she did in his presence. She did not think she still feared him, yet she still shook when he gazed at her.

All her life, she had been told to fear the world.

All her life, she had been taught how not to trust.

By her father.

Although he was a very busy man and had to devote a considerable amount of his time to the kingdom, her father--who was a very good man--insisted on taking part in her education and development. He had provided her with all the books that he could acquire and put her to bed every night (except when he was gone on a campaign) until she was twelve. Often, when he would tuck her in, he would read to her from Faether's, *The Menagerie*. The volume contained many of the old myths of the Circle Lands and her father enjoyed reading to her about the monsters and heroes of ages past. He told stories in much the same manner that his father told him,

not realizing that little girls are sometimes frightened rather than inspired by such tales.

The seed of fear had been planted innocuously within her.

Later, when Mardynn returned from the campaign against the Nortmen, he was bitter. His father and brother had been stolen from him as well as many close companions. Cassandra had not yet reached her tenth birthday when he reentered Warynn, not as a prince, but as king. Although she was young, she saw that the man who returned was not her father. It was as if another man had put on the guise of her beloved father to gain the throne. In her mind, she toyed with the idea that an evil magician--like the ones her father had told her about--had taken over his body in a ruse to enslave the kingdom. Her fantasy died the instant she spoke to him. With a gut-wrenching certainty, she knew. He had aged, he was tired, he was cold, but he was her father. She locked herself in her room and wept. The father she had known and loved was dead; an empty, angry shell stood in his place, using his name.

The stories that he used to tell were supplanted by severe, sardonic advice. He told her to trust no man. Ever. Her father's cynicism bred in her a deep distrust of people. Worse, she felt that he had somehow betrayed her by becoming the man he was now.

Finally, at twelve, she ran him out of her bedroom for good. She could not stand her father's bed-time stories anymore. They were no longer stories of mythical monsters yet they scared her even more than the old tales used to. She withdrew farther and farther into her books, attending state activities with apprehension and disdain. She became aloof and quiet. Her people interpreted her silence as wisdom and Cassandra was too young to know that she ought not let them. She would have died within herself if it had not been for the skirmish of Aslynn Pass.

Although over eighty leagues away, the small, insignificant melee possibly saved her from her despair. A small force from Tryfall was ambushed by a Nortman party. The Nortmen were warning the men from Tryfall to remain in their own kingdom and the Tryfallian force escaped with minor injuries; except for one man. As he was wheeling his mount around, turning back toward Tryfall, his helm slipped from his head. A stray arrow ricocheted off the plates on his shoulder and pierced him below the ear. He died instantly. His mount bore his body out of the gorge and his companions bore his body through the streets of Tryfall.

His widow and daughter were honored in his stead, yet after his death they moved from Tryfall to Warynn. By that time, Mardynn was king. His queen, Sharon took the woman and her little girl in, making them part of the royal household. Susanna, the widow's daughter, immediately took a liking to Cassandra.

The girls, empathetic to each other's loss of a father--Susanna in body, Cassandra in soul--bonded together instantly. Unlike Cassandra, Susanna did not run from her father's death. She was very wise for her age, and taught Cassandra how to be joyful again. She taught her to deal with her walking-dead father and how to laugh again. In turn, Cassandra showed Susanna the delights of books and learning. Susanna thought the princess was the smartest

woman in the kingdom; Cassandra thought the same of her. Yet, in many ways, the princess was still trapped by the fears of her father. Although very well-read, Cassandra feared actually *doing* anything and hid behind her innocence. Even Susanna could not abate her fears.

Yet Princess Cassandra was happy.

For the first time since her father's return from the northern campaign, she had someone to talk with. For the first time in her life, she had a friend her own age.

Then tragedy struck.

Early one morning, the queen decided to go out boating on the small ponds beyond the near reaches. She preferred small outings, so she only invited Sarah--the bereaved mother of Susanna--and the two girls. The idyllic morning beckoned them. Princess Cassandra did not especially enjoy traversing the tiny pond in the Cirrician small-boat. She was young and vibrant. She had to be moving. Warynn was in a time of peace, so they had only one guard. His name was Marque. Cassandra thought him very handsome and strong. She and Susanna flirted with him all morning rather than remaining trapped in the tiny vessel with their mothers. At one point, he offered Cassandra a handful of flowers. The princess declined accepting them, sassily telling him, "I only accept roses."

The young knight's cheeks reddened in embarrassment. Cassandra was very proud of herself. The guard mounted his steed and quickly galloped off to the other side of the meadow, away from the lakeshore. Cassandra and Susanna regretted scaring the comely warrior off, but soon forgot him. They rollicked through the tall Warynnian flowers and rolled in the grass impulsively. Butterflies nuzzled their hair and dew planted wet kisses upon their feet. The rising sun promised a day as gorgeous as the women enjoying it.

Yet death enters in on beautiful days as well as on ugly ones.

Princess Cassandra was occupied with lacing some flowers together for her mother's hair when she heard Susanna cry out. Cassandra glanced up just in time to see her friend rush past her; Susanna sprinted straight for the lake and when she reached the water, she leapt in.

Now that's not a very lady-like thing to do, Cassandra thought.

Then she saw.

In the middle of the small pond the boat floated. Empty. To the side, the princess saw the struggling forms of her mother and Sarah. Cassandra ran to the water's edge and halted. She could not swim. The ripples thrown by the struggling women shattered the serene reflection of the Harte. Susanna swam past her own mother and latched on to Queen Sharon's hair. She tried to pull her to the lakeshore, but the queen panicked and fought Susanna. Cassandra knew that if she hurried, Susanna could save both of the women. She waded out until the water was up to her waist. She watched, helpless, as Susanna battled the queen for her life. By chance, the queen swallowed some water and recoiled to cough it out. Her elbow struck the poor, brave girl above her left eye. Susanna let go and raised her hand to her head, listlessly trying

to keep afloat.

Cassandra could do nothing but watch and cry.

She did not know how much later Marque returned. She heard his horse's hoofbeats long before she could see him. As he topped the last rise, she saw that he held within his gauntleted grasp a handful of perfect red roses.

Once again, Cassandra felt betrayed. And angry. She insisted that Marque be banished from Warynn. Mardynn, the melancholy king, felt such a punishment too severe and merely released the youth from his service. The guard felt the punishment not severe enough and killed himself two days later.

In every way possible, for every reason conceivable, Cassandra blamed herself for the three women's deaths. As she blamed herself for the Greyman losing the use of his arm.

She wondered if she would ever be able to look him in the face again--when his eyes were open. His eyes fascinated her. Yet they also disturbed her. They seemed so soft at times and so hard at other times. She caressed his smooth forehead and cheeks. In the three weeks of his recovery, he had grown a full beard; he had lost nearly fifteen pounds and had slept poorly every night. Tonight had been the first night he had been able to speak coherently.

Many times, he had awakened and just stared at her, like a babe. Sometimes he wept, sometimes he smiled softly, sometimes he called her name. She stayed with him as much as she could and prayed beside his bed for many hours at a time. Several times she was afraid to touch him because she feared that she would find that he was dead.

He mumbled softly in his sleep and she strained to hear the words. At first they were garbled--he sounded like he was weeping--but then they became clear.

"Yes, I do. Please. But I must...yes. Thank you, thank you. How will I know him when I see him? But what if I don't know? All right, all right...I will. Trust. I will. Yes, I would like to be healed. If I am able, I shall try. No, I never--"

He mumbled for a while, then, quite clearly, Cassie heard her name. She smiled.

She rose from her post beside Daryk's bed and stretched. She still did not know why someone was trying to kill her. It appeared to have something to do with her Talisman heritage, but not even Cedric could tell her why someone seemed to be systematically murdering all the known Talismen. Fear? Prejudice? Hate? Ignorance?

Probably yes to all, but who knew for certain? All Cassandra was sure of was that she was scared. She had been having bad dreams for about six nights straight and constantly felt like she was being scrutinized. She felt very vulnerable.

Gathering her teal robe about her, she abandoned the company of the Greyman for the comfort of conversation. Moving into the adjoining room, she found Cedric, Donal, Devin and Amadis, the healer from Devlin, involved in a lively discussion. Donal was speaking emphatically, almost yelling.

"We cannot move him! You heard Amadis, he may not survive

being moved. We won't do it."

"Donal," Devin said. "They know he's here. Twice I've seen them. How long until they force an entrance and try to take him; or worse, kill him."

"Or kill us," Cedric intoned tiredly. "We cannot guess when they will strike or how or with how many. We must remove him, even if it brings his end. If they come, he will most certainly perish."

Cassandra sensed that Cedric had not spoken until that moment. The matter seemed decided. Donal sighed heavily.

"Wonderful!" he groaned. "And how? Exactly how do you propose to 'remove' him? Right out the front door, I suppose. What are we going to do? Say, 'Evil-bad-person-murderer-type-people, we're bringing him out now, so close your eyes.' No, wait a moment--I have an idea! Let's have a parade! That way, everyone would know."

"No need to be facetious, Donal," Devin chided.

"Well then, what?"

"We will pass," Cedric said.

"And end up trapped in an occluded door for all eternity like Erick? No, thank you! With all these we've discovered closed, how many safe destinations can there be? That's right--none. Until we find out who is nullifying our pass-doors--and how they are accomplishing it--we must not use them. Period."

"There is no other way."

"We'll think of something; we can--"

"We have been over this."

"Then where to?" Donal demanded.

"To Whitehall," a voice affirmed.

They turned and fell silent. Before them stood a ghost, the ghost of Daryk Frost. It had to be his ghost: he was stripped to the waist, but the wound that should have fortified his shoulder was nonexistent. He strode toward them.

"To Whitehall," he repeated.

"Ub-bub-bah," Donal said.

"Daryk!" Devin, apparently unafraid of ghosts, ran to Daryk and embraced him. The apparition did not vanish nor did the wound suddenly reappear. A slight discoloration manifested itself across Daryk's shoulder and part of his chest, but that was all.

Daryk looked fondly up at Devin and hugged him back. Then he gazed at the others' incredulous faces and laughed.

"Well, I expect you have plenty of news for me."

Cedric shook his head and cocked a wry smile.

"I expect you have some news for us, too."

EIGHTEEN

"I have some news for you, my friend. They aren't going to let you just walk out of here to go wherever you want. Reynald is going to keep a close eye on you. He needs to be certain that you aren't using magic. That you aren't still a threat."

Marc Todd would not look at Shannon. He was packing a sturdy, plain, grey hide pack--a guildsman's bag--slowly and deliberately. Lore noticed that he had few belongings.

"I will always be a threat."

That was true. Reynald Tym-Waltyr's vigilance would never cease. Todd would be watched for the rest of his life.

"What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe go west. Maybe north."

Something cringed inside Shannon when Todd mentioned going north. *No, not north. That's where he is. He's waiting for you. Hiding. He'll get you. Please not north!* The feeling was irrational and founded only on some silly dreams he had been having lately, but he just could not shake it. He wanted to say something but decided against it. How could you explain to someone that you feared for them because of a dream you had? Even worse, how could you explain to a friend that you feared that something was waiting specifically for him in the north? Something very bad. Something evil. And that it wanted him? And that if it got him it would change him, transform him, pervert him, destroy him?

How could you tell a friend that you feared for him?

That you feared *him*?

Shannon Lore opened his mouth to say all these things--what came out was, "Any particular destination?"

"Not really. I've thought about spending some time in the libraries of the Nortland and--if I can find it--of Caerlydd."

Warning torches flared in Shannon's mind. Both the north and the wilderland were mystical places of powerful magic.

"They'll kill you in the north," Lore tried.

"I doubt it. My mother was half Cyranderran, you know. I'll be able to move among them pretty freely, I believe."

"Marc," Lore asked gravely. "You're not going in search of magic, are you?"

For the first time, Marc Todd looked at him. His eyes were guileless and surprised.

"No. Not exactly. I'm going to see what I may learn about weaponry. Especially swords and axes and cudgels and such. The only thing I've had any success with has been bows. And I--"

"Sand and scars, Marc! Don't you understand how serious this

is? You plan to defy the decision of the Council and continue in your pursuit of magic! That's treason!"

"I'm planning to pursue my weapons-making, that's all."

"With magic!"

"Perhaps."

Exasperated, Shannon grabbed Todd's arm, halting his packing for a moment.

"Marc," he pleaded. "This is serious. If you go against the wishes of the Council, you become a criminal. An outlaw. I swear to you, if you do that, I'll hunt you down and kill you myself."

Todd pulled his arm away.

"I don't think you could."

The sheer certainty in his voice startled Shannon. He wondered, not for the first time, not for the last, if he could take his young student in an arcane duel.

In all honesty, he doubted it.

"Let's not let it come to that, my friend. Stop this foolishness. You can live without the magic, you--"

Whoa! Wait a moment!" Marc interrupted. "Could you? Could you give it up? If the Council decided tomorrow that you were no longer qualified to perform magic, would you be able to just walk away and become an--I don't know--a boot-maker? An ostler? A weaver? Could you just give it up? Just like that?"

Shannon dropped his gaze. He knew he couldn't.

"Well, you better start thinking about it, Shannon, because you may be next. And when it happens, you better be prepared to act as you argue because then it will be you who can no longer use magic. It will be you who can no longer do what you love. It will be you who can no longer live as you please. So think about it. Think about what you will do when it is you."

He was all but shouting, his mouth agape within the fullness of his beard. Shannon knew that Todd was of an exceptional moral character--otherwise he would have never taken him on--but his vehemence scared Shannon. His reaction to the loss was understandable. It would be, he imagined, like facing the death of a loved one. Except the magic had not died; it had just been made illegal to visit. And by the unjust decree of a council of power-hungry, scheming fools.

Yes, his reaction was understandable.

But...

But I can't let him think for an instant that he can get away with opposing the Council. His disdain is going to get him killed. Or us killed.

"Look, Marc. Stay here for a few days. Maybe there's something I can do to get you partial use of your powers back--"

"You know the judgement! It's for life. There is no legal way for you to restore one single spell. One incantation."

"Maybe a reversal--"

"That would take years. Besides, I honestly don't think you could. And if you could, you probably wouldn't."

"That's not true! I would. I tried, Marc! You've got to believe that."

"Whatever."

Shannon put his hand tentatively on Marc's shoulder. The young man recoiled.

"Look. I'm almost packed. Just let me leave in peace."

"Marc," Shannon cajoled. "Be reasonable."

Todd turned away.

"Reason is no longer a part of my life."

He opened a small closet and withdrew a velvet bag. Just by the way Marc held it, Shannon could tell that it contained a weapon; even before he saw the thing.

It was like a bow but it laid on its side, attached to a smooth piece of curved wood. The craftsmanship was remarkable. It almost appeared as if the wood had grown that way out of its own volition rather than been formed into the shape of a crossbow by some artisan. There were no more woods-craftsmen left in Whitehall, as far as Shannon knew. He was instantly curious.

"What is that?"

"I call her Arblest."

Shannon touched the wood gingerly. It bent like a pliable reed. He laughed. He couldn't see how such a flimsy bow could throw even the smallest bolt. And Shannon had seen Marc's quarrel: the bolts were nearly twice the normal length, longer than a longbow's arrow. The stock was smooth and strong, the bow limbs emerging from either side like tree boughs. The string seemed as if it were perpetually nocked, although it was hanging loose now.

"How does it work?" Shannon asked. "Do you just throw the bolts?"

Marc Todd didn't smile.

"Taut," he said to the crossbow.

Suddenly the string snapped tight. He picked the weapon up, not slipping a bolt into the stock groove. He aimed at an imaginary target.

"Fly."

Shwing!

The line snapped forward with incredible swiftness. Anything shot from Arblest would have been impelled with tremendous velocity and force.

"She shoots almost as far as a longbow with greater accuracy," Marc informed Shannon. "Using her, I would never lose an archery tournament here in Whitehall."

Shannon said nothing. Marc was a pretty fair marksman without the aid of a magical weapon.

And that's what it was. A magical weapon. An enchanted bow. Or rather, Shannon suspected now, a crossbow manufactured wholly out of wizardry.

"She is my finest accomplishment," Marc murmured.

Shannon swallowed the bile in his throat.

"What about the wingdrake? Marc, how did you do that?"

Shannon hoped that the need in his voice wasn't as apparent as it sounded to him. He ached to have the secret to the spell. Marc waved him off.

"Oh, that was nothing."

Nothing! Nothing? Some of the greatest arcane sorcerers of the modern era--Shannon included--had spent years trying to uncover the spell to invoke such a beast. Marc had done it effortlessly.

Like it was nothing.

"I found the spell while perusing some Cyranderran texts. That's one of the reasons I want to go north; to--"

"You found it in a *Black Necromancy* book?"

"Well, yes--"

"Marc, that's the Spoiler's magic."

"It's not his magic. It's just magic, period. It's neutral. Besides, your not my mother. I can handle myself."

"Marc, that stuff is dangerous."

"It's getting late, Shannon. I think I'd better be beginning my journey."

"You're not going on any sojourn into the land of the Dark One until I know what you think you're after there."

"Look. I've got to get moving."

"You're going nowhere until I get some answers, sirrah!"

Shannon grabbed Shannon's arm as he pushed by--and came away with nothing but air! Marc Todd dissolved into nothingness. Shannon gasped. A cold chill clamped down on Shannon's spine.

He knew of only one other person alive who had ever performed the magic necessary to enact the shrouding.

Alric Eldarman.

* * * * *

"Sssh! Do you hear it?"

"I think yee've been sniffin' the tallow in yer candle, Barkeddo. I tells yeh, I hear nothin'."

"Listen closely, my Marcellus. 'Tis a ghost, I swear it! So mournful a sound. Aan, I'm scared."

"Boy, either yer ears are better'n mine or yer 'magination needs put to bed. Nothin', I hear nothin'."

"Listen. It's over there. By the roses."

The grizzled old watchman cocked his ears in the direction his young companion pointed and listened carefully. He was no superstitious believer in ghosts. But he was no fool either. His ears weren't what they used to be. It was quite possible that the boy had heard something and that they should check it out.

He stopped.

Yes, now he heard it.

Lilting. Eerie. Ethereal. Spooky.

It was a song. If he concentrated hard, he could just make out the words. It sounded like an old giantish sea-faring song.

That was odd. There were less than a dozen giants still alive

as far as Marcellus knew; and none of them were sailors. The song was not one he was familiar with. As he listened, he decided that whoever was singing was definitely not a giant. The voice was tremulous and weak. Old. Yet it was also soothing in its gruff timbre. He thought that he ought to be scared.

He wasn't.

The voice was crescendoing. He could see where the singer should have been, but there was no one there. The voice approached, growing in volume and clarity, until it passed right between him and Barneddo. The young boy was white with fear. Marcellus was too caught up in the wonderment of it to think about such absurd things as fear. He revelled in the song.

It was about wanderlust.

"These are the shores I called my home
these hills the hills I used to roam
under sun and cloud as a foolish boy
and every hour was filled with joy
But one day I saw the ocean
and felt the salty breeze
as it rushed along the shoreline
and went dancing through the trees
The waves were white and rolling
and the sea was full of foam
The winds were fresh and blowing
Farewell to hills of home!
In a white ship I have sailed
many waters, many years
and the wind has been my laughter
and the salty spray my tears
Under grey clouds I have heard
the gulls and herons cry
as I passed without a word
beneath the everbending sky
And I have followed paths that run
east of the moon, west of the sun
And finally spent, I came to rest
Upon my homeshore, ever blest
But the winds are freshly blowing
and the sea still full of foam
and the waves are out there rolling
So farewell to hills of home!"

Marcellus smiled as the spirit-song faded into the distance. He had never been a very contemplative man; but he sighed contently, lost in his reverie. This was the night, he would be able to tell his grandchildren later, that he actually got to hear the song of a wandering spirit.

It was a blessing, he decided.

A good omen.

That's when Barseddo fainted.

On the other side of Whitehall, at the north-eastern post, another watchman thought he felt a spirit pass. Before his very eyes, the gate he was guarding, opened and closed mysteriously.

No one was there.

He double-checked the area, and when he found a set of distinct footprints had appeared in the soft mud, he said a few prayers to Aan. He was relieved when his replacement came. He opted not to go immediately to his quarters, though, detouring to the *Gryffin Tavern* and sullenly downing two stout ales.

He never told anyone about the passing ghost, although he never forgot about it.

NINETEEN

"It's impossible," Amadis asserted. "Impossible."

The Healer from Devlin had been examining Daryk's shoulder, chest and neck for nearly half an hour. The wound had vanished entirely. It may have just been her imagination, but Cassandra swore the trace marks had become even less noticeable in just the short time that they had been observing them. Daryk had full use of his arm and felt no restriction of movement in his shoulder; he had considerable strength for someone who had been in a bed for over three weeks. He had insisted on shaving before anyone poked and prodded at him and the liberation his face enjoyed from his awful beard only accentuated the smile toying with his lips. He seemed genuinely unimpressed with the miracle that had befallen him.

"You simply must have miscalculated, Lord Amadis. I am fine. I don't think I was ever really in any danger of dying."

You didn't see yourself three days ago, Cassie thought.

"There's not even a scar." Amadis grumbled, torn between fascination and revulsion. "You can't explain that away."

Daryk appeared greatly amused at the attention he was receiving. Carolyn was fussing with his dark, thick hair; Devin had gone to fetch him some food and drink; Donal kept wanting to embrace him; and Cedric kept asking him all sorts of questions. Only Amadis was not so enraptured by this man and so blinded by love as to not wonder at the strangeness of Daryk's recovery. It was obvious to Cassandra--if only her--that the old healer was scared. Daryk's talk of the Adversary and his minions didn't help, either. Poor Lord Amadis surely thought he had the son of the Dark One himself before him. Cassandra wondered if he might be right.

"Truly, I am feeling wonderful! Please stop babying me or I'll come to expect it. Come, we're wasting time. We need to move very quickly."

"Daryk, my boy, now you mustn't rush--" Donal began.

Daryk turned on him.

"How many times has Devin seen the assassins? Once? Twice? How many times has he not seen them? How long until they strike? What if they--" he paused, shuddering. "By the One, Cedric, what did Devin say they looked like? Were they...were they, well, human?"

A sickening coldness filled the pit of Cassandra's stomach. At first, she could not understand why the dread feeling arose so rapidly, yet as she did, a wave of near-panic engulfed her mind.

The Greyman was afraid.

"He said they looked normal. Nothing special." Cedric, too, was bothered by the Greyman's words.

What could frighten this man? she wondered. What would a man who had just danced with Death fear? Cassandra did not want to know. Nervously, she glanced at a tapestry that concealed a large window and firmly told herself that it was only the wind that was making it sway back and forth.

Daryk relaxed visibly after Cedric's words. Donal was staring at him with wide, fear-filled eyes. Apparently, he had not known the warrior to be afraid of anything either.

"Dearheart," Carolyn cooed. "What is it?"

Cassandra hated her for asking. She did not want to know. And yet, they all had to.

Daryk sighed.

"As if the men hunting us weren't enough," he said. "I have seen some other assassins as well. One is an elf; a renegade; the kind they call *dyalf*. He is one of their kind turned bad. I witnessed one of his jobs; it was on a child. She couldn't have been more than sixteen." Daryk shook his head. "Very bloody. Very bloody."

"Why didn't you do something?" Amadis shrieked.

"I couldn't," Daryk explained. "I wasn't there."

"But you just said--"

"Amadis," he said, not unkindly. "I dreamed it."

Daryk dreamed it.

The old healer blanched. His ice-blue eyes darted around frightenedly. A half smile determinedly fortified his lips and he looked around hopefully--desperately--for someone to admit to him that it was just a joke and he the butt of it.

But no one looked at him.

They had all found something unbelievably fascinating about the top of the oaken table. Only Frost would hold his gaze.

And the Healer did not want to look at him.

Daryk dreamed it.

"And you are sure?"

"Yes."

The Healer was quiet then. Cassie respected him for how still he sat. She could feel the tension emanating from him. He wanted to bolt, to run, to escape. Instead, he sat stock still.

"How many, Daryk?" Cedric asked softly.

"Who knows? There could be only three, there could be--I don't know--twenty, thirty?"

"Are they all directed by the same force?" Donal asked.

Shut up, Donal! Cassie did not want to hear this.

"Yes. Definitely."

Cassie prayed he wouldn't say it.

"They are directed by the Adversary."

He said it.

Cassie rubbed her temples with trembling fingers. Why did she have to be involved in this? The Adversary, assassins, disappearing wounds, Talismanic magic, killing. She wanted nothing of it. Yet she felt that she was already too inextricably tangled

in the whole thing to simply walk away. Suddenly, she didn't respect the old Healer, she hated him. She envied him. He could turn and walk out of this house and out of these people's lives forever. She couldn't.

Not now.

Not after living with them. Not after falling in love with them. Not after believing in them.

No, not now.

Devin broke the tension by stumbling into the silent room with a tray for Daryk. The Greyman smiled as he took the tray. Devin retreated to a corner. He seemed to realize that, as usual, his timing was impeccable.

Daryk placed the food on the table next to him. He never touched it again. When he next spoke, he didn't even attempt to give them the obligatory don't-worry-it-will-be-all-right smile. Cassie was glad. She thought they deserved to be dealt with fairly. To be told the truth, no matter how grim.

"The *dyalf*, for all his violence, may be the least of our problems. There are others who are stronger, more dangerous."

He paused. He stuck his tongue out thoughtfully.

"What?" Cedric urged quietly.

Daryk took a deep breath.

"Gregory's dead."

When the expected repercussions didn't occur, Daryk looked up. Donal smiled sadly, apologetically.

"Yes," Cedric said. "We know."

"How? Did someone find the body?"

"No, Daryk. You talk in your sleep."

Devin laughed a little at this but Daryk only nodded.

"Then you know about the Paladin?"

"He is dead, too?"

"Yes."

Cedric scrubbed his snowy beard.

"We had guessed that he had also been killed but we weren't sure. You simply called out his name and you had done that with...others."

He looked meaningfully at Princess Cassandra.

Daryk missed it.

"He is dead," Daryk affirmed wearily. "It was odd--he didn't even fight. They spoke for a long time, but I can't remember much of it. Something about swords."

...and something about serving both Aan and the Spoiler, but that hit too close to home with Daryk. He didn't want to discuss the possibility of someone unwittingly aiding the Adversary in his schemes. Such a discussion invariably led to introspective thoughts that he didn't think he could afford to have right now.

"Did you see who did it?" Devin ventured to ask.

"Yes," Daryk said. "He used to be called Kaene. He was a Magus from Whitehall. Now, he is...something else. Not quite human. They call him Daevlyn Temyn."

Cedric nodded, "The Dark Servant."

"Yes."

Cedric pounded his fist on the table.

"Oh, I am such a fool! I should have known he would go after the Paladin! I should have foreseen it!"

"Father," Carolyn protested gently. "How could you have known? It's been--what--ten years since you've seen him."

"Almost," Cedric conceded. "But you remember how he was! He was insane! Totally out of touch. When he left Whitehall, I tried to keep an eye on him. After about a year, I lost track of him completely. Last year--with Baena's help--I obtained some news of him. He had gone up to Ashentop itself and was reportedly in league with the forces of the north."

"Why such an interest in the man?" Devin asked.

"Father felt...responsible," Carolyn answered for him.

Cedric smiled ruefully, "Yes, I suppose that's true. You see, he was a student, of sorts. Not of magic--he was better than I at that--but of philosophy."

Cassie's brow furrowed.

"I don't understand."

"Well, Cassandra, I considered him a fellow scholar, so I allowed him access to my entire library. One time, when I was feeling especially wise, I loaned to him a volume dealing with the imperfection of our knowledge. It's called *On Homeland's Shore*; it's by Talles. It deals with personal perspective and discusses how a person's schema can adversely affect the pursuit of knowledge."

The line between Cassie's brows grew deeper.

"And you are wondering what this has to do with anything. Well, my dear, the text had a chapter dealing with Aan and the Adversary. It was entirely conjectural. It showed that we had no way to distinguish one from the other. Indeed, other peoples don't--to the Apir, for example, they are one and the same. It further supposed that if the stories of the Adversary were true, then he would certainly fool us into believing that we were serving the One when we really were serving him."

"The people that roam Glendale reportedly call him the Trickster," Cassie supplied meekly.

Cedric raised his eyebrows in approval.

"Yes, and so he is. His tricks snared Kaene at any rate. The man missed the point of the book's argument entirely and became obsessed with the idea that Aan and his nemesis are merely different shades of the same color. He told me that it didn't matter which one you served as long as you received your desires. He told me that even the most devout followers of the One only remain loyal to him because he fulfills their needs: physical needs, emotional needs, intellectual needs. He said that no person would ever remain loyal to Aan if no pleasure were gained from it. He was quite convincing."

Cedric rubbed his eyes tiredly.

"So he went in search of answers. Answers he could use. He knew he would get none from the libraries, and was wise enough not to search for the truth in the company of the Watch; eventually, he sought the answer from the question itself. He went to Ashentop in

search of the Adversary."

The room had become tensely quiet.

"I think he found him," Daryk murmured.

"Whatever he found--" Cedric said. "Changed him. He considers himself the antithesis of the Paladin, the warrior of the other side. I should have known, therefore, that he would have targeted the Paladin."

"So what leads us to believe that Temyn murdering the Paladin has anything to do with any of the other assassinations?" Donal asked.

"Nothing," Cedric answered.

"Except my dreams," Daryk added.

"Yes," Donal noted. "Once again, nothing except your dreams. Daryk, don't you think you've been getting too much sleep lately? I think you should abstain from any kind of sleeping-type activity for the next, oh, let's say thirty years."

"I wish I could," Daryk chuckled. "But we're not done with these dreams yet."

"You mean there's more?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Oh wonderful! Daryk, can't you bring any good news?"

Daryk smiled that wry smile of his.

"Apparently not."

"Well, let's have it then."

Daryk rubbed the back of his neck.

"There is something else hunting people out there. It's not like anything I've ever seen. It looks like an animal, but it thinks like a man."

"A Bogey?"

"No, but similar, I suppose. It's taller, though, much taller. It has eyes that glow the way a Bogey's do, but that's really where the physical resemblance ends. Its fur is sleek, its movements quick. It moves amazingly fast. Oh, and it has these huge dagger-like claws--"

He was gesturing with his hands. But the claws couldn't have been that big, could they?

Cassie bit her lip.

"It's called the Wari-tzen," she said, uncertainly. "My father used to read to me from *The Menagerie*; one of the stories in the book talked of it."

"Tell us about it," Cedric coaxed.

"Well," Cassie began, reluctantly. "It was much like Daryk described it except bigger."

Daryk scoffed, "It couldn't get much bigger."

"It was! It was supposedly created by the Adversary, so I guess it could be just about any size it wanted! The legend stated that it was at one time human--a man that had volunteered to become...whatever it is. That's why there aren't very many of them: a man has to first proffer himself to the Dark One, then survive the transformation, then learn to stay sane. Or perhaps the creature's not sane. I guess it wouldn't matter. According to legend, a Wari-tzen killed Aerondell the High Elf. They are pretty

nasty."

"I would agree with that," Daryk grumbled.

"That would explain the animal--what we thought was an animal-killing the other people," Donal noted.

Cedric smoothed his halo/hair with a broad hand.

"But does that mean that there are several, or one?"

"Does there need to be more than one? Whatever the thing hunts, it gets. At least anything outside a castle wall."

"And speaking of assassins and being outside castle walls," Donal broke in. "How are we going to get Daryk and Cassie out of here without our friends knowing? Or had all of you forgotten about our little predicament?"

"Don't worry, Donal," Daryk grinned. "I have a plan."

TWENTY

The plan was simple.

They were supposed to watch the manor until they were reasonably certain that the wounded man hadn't been moved. Once they were sure that he was still there, the assassins were to move in quickly under cover of darkness. They were to kill everyone--even the servants--and set the manor aflame. Then they were to report back to the fair-haired one at the *Crossroads Inn*.

Simple.

But Wilkes just could not seem to kill the dread foreboding that scurried around inside his torso. Everything seemed so simple. What could go wrong? The Talisman was incapacitated, the manor had no standing guards, there was no local reeve to worry about. Simple. Sure, they might have seen them already, but what would that help them? No one had attempted to run for help and it wasn't as if the occupants of the manor could learn the skills of combat before the assassins came upon them tonight. No, it was going to be simple.

Still, Wilkes was uneasy.

The manor was all but deserted, large and looming. Although the members of the family were high Bloodlords, Wilkes had seen almost no servants. The household was managed with only a token staff. Peculiar, but not so peculiar that Wilkes should have been so concerned. The few servants were already asleep in their cottage adjacent to the huge manor. They would not even be a factor in the night's adventure.

There were only seven people in the estate, counting the Talisman, who was supposed to be near death. Two were women. Of the remaining four, one was a Healer, sworn to the preservation of life and confined by his oath against the taking of it. That left only three men to worry about. All three were large--one huge--but only the largest seemed to be a professional. The other two were older, perhaps fifty. Yet they seemed to be scholars rather than soldiers. The fair-haired gentleman had assured them that none of the targets were skilled with magic except for the Healer, but Wilkes was still uncertain. He had heard rumors about Cedric Cross, the old advisor to the High King, possessing the witchkin magic. What then?

Things looked less simple.

Yet the job would still be fairly simple. They had a Sundered wizard with them to combat any magic and ten good men. The plan would work and he would be much more wealthy. More importantly, he would have helped kill the Grey Prince. That was the main reason

he had accepted the job so readily. He had killed quite a few targets in his time. Thirty-two people in all, if you counted the three children and the old lady. But he found none of them challenging. He had become an assassin because killing was the only thing he excelled at; now, he was finding that he was too good at it. He didn't enjoy the blood rush as much anymore. It was getting boring.

And so he was going after the Grey Prince.

Oswal approached and whispered to him. They had seen movement in the house. Be ready.

Wilkes was.

They could not escape. Every route was covered, the moon was bright and the manor sat atop a hill. No one could even stick their foot outside the protective walls of the estate without being spotted by the assassins. They would be caught if they tried to run. And killed.

Simple.

He heard a clamor echoing from up the hill. The manor's small portcullis was being raised.

This is it, he thought.

They were going to make a run for it. But they weren't going to make it. On the road at the bottom of the hill, the assassins had erected a line of caltrops to turn the horses. The mounts would see the spikes protruding from the ground and turn their riders back into the attack of the assassins.

Wilkes nodded to himself. The men he worked with were good. The best money could buy. They would stop the fleeing targets, dispose of them quietly and move on. The manor was on the very fringes of Tolliver so there was no risk of any interlopers interfering. If the people did somehow find a way past the fortifications on the road, the killers had fine Warynnian mounts. They would catch up to the targets. They would kill them. That would be the end of it.

Simple.

Wilkes emptied the vial of poison the fair-haired man gave him onto his blade. It was called wishbane or whistbane or something like that.

Leaning the blade against the tree by his post, he took out his bow and nocked it. The gate was all the way up now. No movement within. If they got past him, he was to run to where Garay had the horses and the chase would ensue.

He saw the shadow thrown out of the gateway before he saw its owner; when a lone man strode out alone into the night, he was somewhat taken aback.

The man was all in grey, tall, proud, searching the darkness. He bore a sword but led no mount. His face looked gaunt and thin. Severe.

He was the Grey Prince.

Anything but simple.

He looked to be as healthy as Wilkes was. Apparently their employer had been misinformed about his bed-ridden state. Wilkes' tongue was plastered to the roof of his mouth. He didn't like the

feel of this.

he Grey Prince darted across the manor's lawn, heading not for the road, but for the estate's outwork. He reached the tower and slipped inside. Wilkes heard the double *thunk!* of the bar falling and an arrow striking the door.

He had not even drawn his.

"Damn!" he cursed. Things were going bad. His stomach was flipping. Suddenly, he thought that he had underestimated the merits of *boring*.

"Wilkes!"

Oswal.

"Yes!"

"Did he have a bow?"

"No, a sword."

"Any movement from the house?"

"No."

The killer's leader considered the problem a moment.

"All right. Spread the word. Gorice will lead Douglas and Krys and Bryan and Randyll on the manor. The rest of you will come with me. Do it!"

Wilkes quailed. He wanted Gorice to come with them. He was a sorcerer and could protect them against the Grey Prince's evil wizardry. Oswald would have none of it. He insisted on sending Gorice into the manor. That was so foolish! Yet despite Wilkes' protestations, the would-be-Magi went to the manor.

The gate was still raised and the small force snuck inside stealthily. Oswald waited a moment and then led his group to the outwork. They pushed open the heavy door and it slid back easily. An empty room awaited on the other side. Stairs ascended along the back wall, circling up to the roof. Oswald ordered Wilkes to stay and guard the door.

Gratefully, he complied.

The assassins slunk up the stairs, leaving Wilkes alone at the outwork's entrance. The night was quiet and peaceful and it put every nerve in his body on edge. In the quietude, Wilkes imagined that all kinds of terrible monsters were creeping, slithering or lumbering toward him.

He was wrong.

No monsters approached.

After a millennium of seconds, he heard a pounding above. Its monotonous *boom!* somehow calmed him a little. He walked out a little from the stone edifice. He could tell nothing of his companion's success in the manor. The group had split less than five minutes ago.

As he turned back toward the outwork, there was a heavy *thunk!* in the open area in front of him. He wheeled and faced the empty lawn.

Even before the knife entered his back, he knew he had made a mistake. He dropped softly, like a doll, a hand clamped to his mouth. As he touched the moist earth, he was rolled gently on his back. With less fear than he would have imagined, he realized that he could no longer move.

Above him was an angelic face, perhaps the most beautiful he had ever seen. Long, dark tresses framed it and they were blowing playfully in the wind now. Her eyes were large and compassionate, her skin smooth and tawny. It was a face that belonged to a queen.

A woman! he thought incredulously, as the light began to fade. After all his fears of monsters and Talismen, he had been stabbed by a woman!

Just before his heart stopped, Carolyn thought she heard him say, "Simple." She dragged the body inside the outwork and hurried back toward the manor. She passed Donal as she ran. He was sprinting toward the outwork.

He had a firebrand in each fist.

* * * * *

Devin tried to step as silently as possible. The night was preternaturally quiet. Each snapping twig, each crumbling leaf echoed and reverberated in the stillness. Devin held his breath. He was close now. So close that the horses were becoming anxious. He wasn't too worried about them: horses had never betrayed him before, why would they begin now?

Now, he thought. How would Daryk do it?

He could see the assassin up the hill from him about thirty feet away. Several quick strides and he could be on him. Quickly. Efficiently. Like Daryk.

Yes, that was the way to do it. He would sprint for the man and run him through before he could even turn around. That was if he was fast enough. If not--

Don't think about it. Do it!

He readied himself. In his mind, he saw himself charging up to the man, the assassin turning...and his arm going weak. He pictured his blade dropping a glancing blow off his opponent's shoulder and flying from his limp fingers.

With a colossal mental heave, he threw himself forward, dashing through the thin underbrush. About fifteen feet from the assassin, Devin's foot caught an exposed root and he slid, face first, across the loamy earth.

Surprised, the killer spun around. Devin cursed. He pushed himself to his hands and knees, spitting out a mouthful of soil. *Yeah, just like Daryk would have done.* He was shocked to find that the man was very young--perhaps as young as he was--and looked as afraid as Devin as well.

They simply stared at each other in horrid fascination for a few moments. Then, frantic with terror, the assassin fumbled for his sword. Devin sprang into action.

Just as the killer's weapon cleared its sheath, Devin pushed

his point through flesh. The assassin gasped in pain, dropping his sword. Devin stepped back, his breathing just as labored as the young man's.

The wound was fatal but slow. Again, the petrified stare-down. Then the killer's eyes rolled wildly and he began to scream for help. The man's voice was an awful, raspy cry.

"No, no! Be quiet!"

Devin stabbed him again. The man screamed louder. Again. Louder. Again and again. The wailing began to subside.

Finally, silence.

Devin looked down at his handiwork. Nearly a half a dozen tries before he killed him. Devin leaned against a tree and retched enthusiastically. The man was the third he had ever killed. The first and the second mere minutes ago. He clutched the tree tightly, teetering on drunken legs. In years to come, he would try to remember the encounter as a mark of his bravery. Right now, he felt like a coward.

He had thought that sword-fighting was romantic and noble. What he had just done was anything but romantic and noble. When he felt more like himself again, he tossed the body over the back of one of the horses and lashed it down. He noted that the mounts were tethered to trees. Daryk hated when people did that; it was one of his personal exasperations. Devin cut the horses free and headed back toward the manor.

He slipped inside the concealed side gate just behind Carolyn. Turning, he gazed across the moon-lit hill. Yes, Daryk had been right. If they had attempted to sneak out without a diversion, they would have been spotted and all of them would be dead now. He could clearly see the countryside below and the entire surrounding area. Trees were plentiful but not very thick. He guessed that he had been lucky to make it down to the little grove where the horses had been tethered without being seen by the assassin guarding them.

Like he had been lucky in killing him.

Glancing over at the outwork, he saw the beginnings of the fire Donal was setting begin to flicker and flare. He turned and ducked through the portal smooth against the manor wall. Princess Cassandra awaited him inside.

"Come on," he said. "Donal has his own key, he can get back in without one of us having to stand here and guard the door."

He squeezed his prodigious girth past her slim form and led her through the tight corridors of the lower level of the manor. They emerged near the stables and began to ready the horses. The stable, contained within the walls of the manor but behind the manor proper, had a wide gate at one end that opened to the outside. There still might be some assassins lurking around near the gate but Devin hoped that if there were, they would soon be scared away. The worst thing about being stuck in the manor was not knowing how many killers there were waiting outside. For all they knew, there might be a whole regiment of murderers sitting in wait for them just beyond the first turn in the road.

He hoped Daryk knew what he was doing.

Devin and Cedric and Donal had been forced to kill five men.

Three of them Donal and Cedric had been able to slay with arrows. Two Devin had been required to dispatch himself. He knew that if it weren't for his incredible strength and size, he would now be one of the dead.

The princess was pulling the supplies over to where Devin was tending the horses. The pack were too large for her, but she insisted on being of some help. After about half of the bags had been hauled close to Devin, she paused to rest. She fidgeted.

"Devin," she said, troubled. "There was blood on Carolyn's dress when she came back from checking the entrance to the outwork. Did she kill someone."

Sand and scars. Devin hadn't seen the blood.

"I imagine she did, my princess."

"But she's so...so...feminine."

Devin chuckled then said a little wistfully, "Yes, m'lady. That she is."

"Then how could she?"

"You've got to understand, Cassie, that we are not all simply what we appear to be. Daryk says that he thinks that, in many ways, we are not just individuals with one personality, but that each person contains many facets, many sides. In effect, many people. Carolyn's mother was a Tryfallian. In Tryfall, even the women are taught to be warriors."

"But men are supposed to be ones that fight."

"I suppose that that's what our narrow-minded society tells us. All I know is that I wouldn't want to have to duel Carolyn! Her mother taught her all the secrets of the Tryfallians, and there are many. They are the greatest swordsmen in the world."

He began to tie down the packs to the three strong horses: his warhorse, Thunderbird, Daryk's Soutland stallion and Cassie's cream palfrey. He continued to talk while he loaded, barely even winded by the exertion.

"I suppose her mother taught her how to be a man but Cedric taught her how to be a woman. I think they both did a fine job."

Cassie nodded a bit enviously.

"What happened to her mother?"

"She's dead."

"Oh."

Cassie didn't want to talk about death and people dying.

"What's taking them so long?" She paced irritably.

"Daryk is probably just taking his time."

* * * * *

You're wasting time, Daryk Frost, he reprimanded himself. He had been standing on the roof of the outwork, stalling. He

looked over at the Cross Manor. It was a little over a hundred feet away, dark and towering. A thin line stretched like a spider's thread between the two structures, as if holding the two buildings together.

Daryk remembered the first summer he spent in Tolliver. The annual fair was in full swing, drawing people from all over the Southern Reaches. He remembered the festive, light mood of the celebration and all the wonderful sight, sounds and smells. But what he remembered the most was Joseph the Clown.

Joseph the Clown was really a cobbler from Tolliver. But every year, when the Festival came around, Joseph would don his motley and bells and entertain the children of the area. Then for the climax of the fair, Joseph the Clown would walk the line from the outwork to Cross manor.

A few years back he had fallen. He dropped five stories. They had not had the Festival since.

But Daryk remembered Joseph the Clown. And he remembered the line. The same line that stretched before him now, joining the buildings. Now, he wasn't sure that he was so glad that he remembered it. Standing on the ground all those years ago, he had thought that the feat looked simple.

Things look different when you're standing on the ground.

Daryk smelled the night air. He could discern the scent of the fresh grass below. The breeze was a mother's whisper, stirring the leaves in the trees ever so gently. Daryk breathed deeply, trying to inhale the serenity.

Yes, this would be a fine night to die.

The tranquility was destroyed by a sudden thunderous pounding on the door to the roof. He had seen the team of assassins split; half went into the manor, half headed up here. Daryk decided that they had finally made it up the stairs. He had hoped that all of the killers would follow him into the outwork. No such luck. He prayed that everyone inside the estate would be all right.

He leaned over the edge.

No movement.

He had to wait until Carolyn checked the bottom of the outwork before he could attempt to cross the line. If the door to the roof gave before then, he would die. He tried to hurry her along in his mind.

No movement.

This is foolish. How did I ever think up such an idiotic plan? I must have been delirious. Come on Carolyn, hurry!

The door gave a squealing creak.

Still no movement.

Daryk tested the line. It was old. The mountings had become rusted, the cable frayed. Daryk was beginning to like this plan less and less. The line didn't seem strong enough to bear the weight of a kitten. He looked down again.

Donal was waddling toward the outwork with the torches; Carolyn was sprinting in the opposite direction. In the distance, he could see Devin trudging up the hill. Across from him a shutter flew open. Cedric.

Daryk began to cross. He grasped the line firmly and lowered his body over the rampart through the thin embrasure. The only way to test the cable was to let his full weight fall and hope that it would hold. He slid off into emptiness hanging suspended in air. The line creaked agonizingly but held.

Daryk expelled his breath. His arms felt weak. He swung his legs up and locked his ankles above the line. Slowly and steadily he inched his body across the void.

Glancing down, he saw that the fire had spread nicely, quietly growing on the floor's first level. It seemed unreal that death could be so prevalent on a calm night like tonight.

Then he heard the screams and it became real again.

The smoke must have found its way up the stairs to the assassins. Realizing their predicament, one of them was panicking. Abruptly, the cries ceased. The pounding began again. More insistently.

Hand over hand. Easy. Slow. Careful.

The cable was biting into Daryk's hand; he felt blood seeping down his forearms. His breath was coming more difficultly now. Acrid smoke assailed his nostrils. His eyes were watering.

Almost half way across.

On the rooftop of the outwork, the door shattered into splinters. Dimly, Daryk was aware of Cedric's urgent exhortations. Pausing to rest, he looked back to where he had come from. The killers were pacing the roof anxiously. Smoke was billowing out of the split doorway like dragon's breath.

One of the killers saw Daryk dangling in the cool air and cried out to his comrades. But Cedric was ready. The moment he set foot upon the raised rampart, a feathery shaft appeared, protruding from his belly. Mouth agape, he toppled forward into the gulf. He barely made a sound as he fluttered through the night. His body landed with a hollow *whoof!*

As if he wanted to follow his companion, one of the other assassins gave a strangled cry and leapt into the gap between the edifices. His gloved hands closed on the weathered cable. Daryk was nearly thrown off by the force of the jolt. His legs slipped and he was hanging on by only one hand. He tried to regrip the line with his free hand, but the blood made his palm slick and the best he could do was wrap the edges of his fingers around the cable for a few seconds at a time. Another of the hired blades scooted to the edge of the roof, obviously planning to follow his more intrepid friend. Fletching grew from his neck.

He gurgled as he fell.

Using all his strength, Daryk pulled himself up until he could swing the crook of his elbow over the cable. The killer was bouncing along the line towards him. They were less than ten feet apart. Without a moment's hesitation, Daryk drew his witchblade. The man paused, thinking that the Greyman intended to use the blade on him.

He didn't.

With a strong upward-swinging arc, Daryk cut at the line. Both the cable and the assassin screamed in protest. Daryk swung

again. The killer began to scuttle crab-like back toward the outwork, forgetting the fire's danger for the moment.

On the third stroke, the line snapped.

Torpidly, ponderously, the cable swept downward. Daryk crashed against the hard, unyielding stone. He lost his grip and slid down on top of the assassin. They collided with bone-powdering force. The killer plummeted down to the soft ground below. Daryk, in the split-second after smashing into the hapless mercenary, regained his precarious hold. He swayed in the wind like a pendulum.

His strength was drained.

His stamina wasted.

Looking down, the earth spun far below. He wondered if he would be able to survive the fall. He could see his blade glinting amidst the somber corpses. His fingers slipped an inch.

Then the line moved. He was dragged upwards a few feet. He risked losing his hold, releasing one hand and clutching at the loose line below his grip. He wrapped it tightly around his forearm and let it hold on to him. It felt as if it were cutting his arm off but he endured it.

Another few feet.

Another.

He began pushing upwards with his feet, scrabbling against the bruising stone. His breath came out in weeping sobs.

No! This is not a fine night to die! This is a fine night to live! I don't want to die without my sword in my hand. I want to live!

He pushed with renewed vigor, his face slamming into the wall unmercifully. The heat on his back from the inferno behind him was blistering, but it was nothing compared to the furnace in his lungs. He was going to make it, damn it!

Go! Push! Push!

Then he was over the top. His knee smashed into the embrasure and he totally lost his grip because of the pain. It didn't matter; he collapsed onto the cool flagstones.

Cedric was on his back a few feet away, gasping for breath. He didn't look up at Daryk.

"Good...good thing you...lost some weight...over the last couple of weeks," the big man panted.

Daryk tried to laugh but couldn't.

* * * * *

"Try to stay along well-travelled routes. We don't want you running into any more of them."

Donal was spreading advice as if he were spice over a meal.

The quality was good but so much of its actuality made it seem unpleasant. He realized what he was doing and bit his lip.

"Don't worry," Daryk soothed. "We'll be fine. I have some friends to aid us along the way. Besides, I'm a big boy."

"I know, I know. I don't mean to mother you."

"That's all right."

Devin approached from the stable's gate.

"I think we're safe. If there were any more, then they've run off. Not that we wouldn't see them well before they came close to us."

The outwork was blazing brightly, transforming the peaceful dark of the night into a crackling, snapping, mid-day light.

"Yeah," Daryk grunted. "Let's get moving."

They all embraced. Daryk held Carolyn for a long time, whispering in her ear. Jealous, Cassie turned away to check her saddle. Not that she knew anything about saddles.

There was a creak and Daryk was astride his stallion. He grabbed the reins of the pack horse and led the horse to him. While he checked the supplies once again, he spoke quietly in Cedric's direction.

"No more than a day, right."

Cedric sighed.

"I promise."

"You should travel across to Damask, I think. That way, if there are still assassins on our trail, you won't accidentally run into them."

"Perhaps," Cedric said wistfully.

Smoky tendrils of hair floated above his shiny forehead. His fine garments were soiled, his mind distraught.

"Yes," Daryk said. "They will probably raze it. I think the war has begun, my friend. I wish it didn't have to materialize here."

"My library--"

"Pick only the most valuable."

"They are all valuable to me."

For the first time, Cassie saw Cedric as an old, tired man. He was weathered beyond his years. Before, that seasoning seemed reflected only in his dignity and knowledge.

Now he looked worn.

"Cedric--"

Yes, yes," he said impatiently. "I am old and sentimental, but I am no fool."

"Good. If you don't reach Whitehall within a week of our arrival, I'll come looking for you."

"We'll make it."

Cassie was helped up onto her mount by Devin. She gazed down on the faces of the people she had come to love in such a short time. Cedric's pallid face was looking back at her with fatherly concern. His eyes glittered wetly. Beside him, Donal was glancing around restlessly, attempting to find some way to be of use. Carolyn stood well behind them, wrapped in a blanket.

As regal as ever.

She looked like an ice queen. Imperviously beautiful. And yet, Cassie knew the warmth contained beneath that frigid exterior. As much as she wanted to hate her sometimes, she nearly cried looking at her. Yes, she loved her too.

Amadis had been badly shaken and had opted not to take part in the farewells. Cassie was glad. He wasn't one of them.

"Let's go," Daryk's gravelly soft voice urged behind her.

Devin leaped onto Thunderbird and wheeled her around. Carolyn opened the gate for them and Devin bounded out. Cassie followed. Looking back, she saw the manor for the last time in her life. As Daryk went through the gate behind her, he bent down to grasp Donal's hand and to kiss Carolyn lightly.

Then he spurred his horse and led them into the night.

TWENTY-ONE

He emerged from the night like a black snowflake from a midnight storm. He was a part of the darkness, an appendage. He rode a sable mount and wore black and deep purple clothes. When he spoke, the sound reminded Lleric of bugs scuttling across the cold flagstones.

"Where is he?"

Lleric straightened. He was not going to be intimidated.

"You needn't bother. I've taken care of it. I sent a troupe of hired men to deal with him. And his friends."

The black thing laughed. A dry, harsh, soulless cackle that raised the hairs on Lleric's neck.

"No man will be any threat to him. He is too powerful. He is more powerful than even he knows yet. Your assassins will fail. Tell me where he is."

Lleric's stomach was queasy from fear. He could see the black thing's face now. It was like a skull. The skin bleached, the eye sockets sunken, the death-grin prominent. Only the eyes seemed alive. They shined with a feral intensity.

Lleric averted his eyes.

"I told you, the assassins will take care of him."

"No," the night-creature hissed. "He will take care of them. They will not return to you, mark my words."

"Temyn--"

"He is in Tolliver, is he not?"

Lleric was taken aback. Did the Dark Servant prophesy as well? Lleric shuddered.

"How did you know?"

"The animal has been wounded, he retreats to his cave. To the prince-without-a-kingdom, Tolliver is the only home left."

Lleric scowled. He wasn't sure he believed that the perversion before him discovered the Grey Prince's location merely by deduction.

"So I am right."

It wasn't a question.

Lleric turned.

"If that's all--"

Temyn grabbed his shoulder and wrenched him around. An icy grip closed on Lleric's cheeks, squeezing his lips into a comical baby-face.

"Be certain of where your loyalty lies, Lleric Ashe. You have been purchased. We will not sell you back."

Temyn's hand smelled foul and diseased. Lleric had to fight

back the rising gorge in his throat.

The skeleton lord released him and he fell back gagging.

Had Lleric been a braver or more foolish man, he might have loosed his sword then. He didn't. He enjoyed living. He had much to live for.

Temyn wheeled and disappeared into the darkness. Except for the lingering odor, you might not have even known he had been there.

TWENTY-TWO

Cassie drew the blankets closer about her. She decided that she would never become a great traveller. She hated their journey thus far, and they had only been travelling for a little over a day and a half! Her back was sore, her neck was sore, her legs were sore, and--ooh--her butt was sore. She flexed her hands. Even her fingers hurt.

She felt dirty, she felt uncomfortable, she felt cold and she felt ugly. She needed a bath and she needed to brush her hair. She was miserable.

And she said not a word about it.

It was important to her to show the Greyman that she was as tough as he. Of course, she wasn't, but she didn't want him to know that. She gritted her teeth and pretended to enjoy the freedom of the trip.

She didn't think he bought it.

Still, she didn't complain. What good would it have done anyway? She would have accomplished nothing by whining except making the Greyman angry and making herself look like a self-centered, self-pitying, selfish child.

Which she was.

No, she amended. *She used to be.*

She understood that there was more to this world than her little concerns; and if she had learned nothing else from her experiences, she now knew what the word *selfless* truly meant. And she wanted that adjective to describe her.

Like it did Daryk Frost.

He had just finished building a tiny fire--large enough to cook them a humble dinner, small enough to not be seen by brigands--when Devin returned from checking the horses.

"Taken care of."

"Tethered to bushes, not trees?"

"Yes, m'lord"

"Excellent. Now, could you do me a favor, Dev, and check upriver about three miles for another camp. Be careful, if they have no fire, then they probably won't want you to see them--so definitely don't let them see you."

"Do you really think we'll encounter any thieves?"

"Reportedly, the bands have been quite busy lately, so I would think it likely, yes."

"Great."

Devin lumbered off into the twilight.

"And try not to fall into the river!" Daryk yelled after him

playfully.

"Ha, ha, ha," came the reply.

Cassie giggled.

Daryk smiled at her and said, "Be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"To check the horses."

"But, Devin just did that."

"I know," he said, and moved to the other side of a large tree where Cassie could hear the heavy steps and snorts of the horses. After a moment, he returned.

Seeing her shivering, he wrapped his blanket around her.

He sat down beside her and handed her a plain, undecorated cup. He retrieved a pan from the fire that contained a mixture of herbs, spices and water. As he poured her some, a rich, pungent odor sweetly drifted down into her. She smiled.

"Mmmm. Smells good."

"Khazan," he explained. "The dwarves use it to keep them warm on long journeys." He laughed. "Except, they add extra flavor to it with mead; I just use honey."

"It's good."

Daryk nodded.

They sat there a moment in silence. The Greyman obviously enjoyed simply listening to the noises of the night. With some frustration, Cassie realized that he could sit there all night like that and not utter a single word. She knew so much about this man, yet she knew him not at all. And she wanted to hear him talk. Not only to learn about him, but also just to hear that voice--that disturbing, moving voice of his.

"Why did you check the horses again?"

"Just to be safe."

"Why tether them to the bushes?"

"So they can escape an attack."

"An attack? From what?"

"Wild animals. Men. Who knows?"

"But then we'd have no mounts."

"Yes."

"But that's foolish."

He sipped his *khazan*.

"Yes."

She bit her lip. This man made no sense. Briefly, she considered talking to the horses. She thought they might be a little more garrulous. She sipped her *khazan* thoughtfully. They were probably smarter too.

She shifted restlessly and tried to think of the best way to breach the silence once again. She nearly jumped when the Greyman spoke.

"How much do you know about the Paladin?"

"He's dead," she answered smartly.

He frowned at her.

"Besides that."

"Little," she admitted. "I've read that the tradition goes all the way back to the Walker himself; I know that he is supposed

to represent Aan on the earth, but I'm not sure what that means exactly."

"That's okay, neither did he."

"What?"

"Never mind. Go on."

She rested her cup against her lips, warming her face.

"He is a warrior and a priest. He supposedly carries a sacred sword. Um, he...fights evil. I don't know. The last one was Eanderthall the Wise, the one before him was Barrimore Sael, before him was...was...oh, I'm not sure."

"Artiste the Black?"

"The Black?"

"So you've not heard of him?"

"I don't think so."

"No wonder really. He visited the Circle Lands nearly two hundred years ago. According to what I've read, he was the greatest Paladin ever. What I've read described him as a giant of a man with skin the color of night. He was a great warrior, but he also had the power of a Healer. He was magnificent. According to Eanderthall, he was the best that was or will be."

"You seem to know quite a bit about these Paladins."

"Well, they keep finding me. I've fought alongside one and travelled alongside another."

"What do you mean?"

Daryk poured himself another cup of *khazan*.

"I fought in the...Northern Campaign...with Barrimore Sael. He died there--"

"I knew that."

Daryk's eyebrows raised.

"Oh. Do you know about my excursion to the lands of Glendale and Myth'll also?"

"I knew you went to the west."

"I did more than simply venture into the wilderland of the west, Cassie, I went in search of a teacher--I just didn't know that was what I was doing."

"The Paladin."

He nodded, "The Paladin. As it turned out, yes. He knew I was coming. He called me, I suppose. I mean, I didn't really know for certain that he was there, but I somehow knew that if I went into Glendale, I'd find what I needed.

"When I encountered Eanderthall, I didn't know who he was. He didn't look like a warrior, most assuredly not the warrior of God. Well, except for the fact that he was clad in white."

He shook his head.

"He was doing the most incredible thing: a huge nest had fallen from the crag where it had been built. It was lodged between a small tree and the cliff face about forty feet from a path through the mountains."

"Whoa! Since when does Glendale have mountains?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Daryk said. "The Ademan just north of Dellwood. I'm not sure where I was going. I suppose some kind of destiny moved me."

He swirled his drink thoughtfully.

"When I came upon the Paladin, he was climbing down to the nest. At first, I thought he was robbing the nest. I remember having this incredible urge to cut the rope right then. Maybe I should have."

He saw Cassie's outraged look.

"The nest was a graefawn aerie. I thought he was stealing the eggs to sell them illicitly."

Cassie's face scrunched up.

"A graefawn, you know--a pseudodrake. One of those little creatures that looks like a dragon except it only grows to about a foot in length. It has fur instead of scales. It's illegal to hunt them--they are a part of the Erindale Coat of Arms."

"Oh, yes!" Finally Cassie remembered what one was. Damned ugly little things if she remembered correctly.

"Well, as it was, this man was struggling to make it up the cliff face with some in his arms. It was hard going, I could tell, and it took nearly an hour for him to make it back up to the path. I had planned on waiting until he made it up, then giving him a good beating to teach him a lesson. When he finally made it, I was too surprised to do anything."

In Daryk's voice, Cassie heard echoes of the violent, reckless, dangerous Daryk Frost that her father had warned her about. The voice scared her.

"When he topped the edge of the drop, Eanderthall was holding, not an egg, but a hatchling. It had clawed and cut and bruised him in its fear, but it was alive. It was safe.

I looked down at the nest again, really looking for the first time. There were no eggs in the toppled nest, only newly hatched graefawn. The wind was buffeting them and every once in a while one would be thrown out. They hadn't learned to fly yet, so they were dashed on the rocks below. The nest only held a dozen or so. And they were being rocked and tipped and threatened by the wind every second. He bundled up the little thing he'd saved and began to climb down again.

"I couldn't believe it! The winds were picking up. One bad gust and he would have been the one crumpled on the rocks. I yelled for him to stop, but he didn't listen. Halfway down, his rope snapped and he fell. His heel snagged on an outcropping just above the nest. I heard the snap as his leg broke. I heard the scream as he felt it. And I wanted to leave him like that, Aan help me, I did. Hanging upside down and tortured by the wind. But I couldn't. I threw down a rope and he grabbed it. I made him tie it around his waist in case he blacked out. It was unnecessary. He was completely aware the whole time.

"When he regained his strength he began to climb--down! He made it to the nest and struggled to get one of the graefawn. Finally, he grabbed the runt. He then began the ascent back to where I was. It must have been agonizing. Almost a full hour later, he made it. He was drenched with sweat and he was trembling from fear and pain and exertion. He was a sorry sight.

"I was so mad at him for risking his life--a pitiful one, but

nevertheless the life of a man--for a stupid animal. Right after he made the top, a huge gust tipped the nest and all its fragile cargo over onto the rocks below. I cursed at him. I told him how stupid he was. I showed him that for all he did, for all he cared, for all he risked, the hatchlings still died. Damn it! Any fool could have seen that that was going to happen! Any idiot could have seen! I mocked him. I taunted him. I told him that for all his 'bravery' the graefawn still died! And still he sat there cradling his stupid little monster. I couldn't believe it! I asked him why he did it. Why he risked his pitiful little life when it...when it just didn't matter."

The Greyman's fists were clenched tightly in front of him.

"And he looked at the hatchling, and he looked at me, and he said, 'It mattered to this one.'"

Cassie blinked her eyes clear.

She took a shuddering breath.

"I see," she said, thinking that--for once--she really did. "And you don't tether your horses where they might be trapped because it might matter to one of them."

He looked at her intensely, studying her.

"Yes," he murmured. "You understand, don't you?"

She nodded.

He smiled wryly.

"You are an exceptional woman, then. Most of the time, I don't understand me."

She giggled. He looked down onto his cup and she watched him carefully.

What a foolish, wonderful man!

All right, she thought. *No more questions as to why people are so endeared to him.* He was the most open, honest, genuine man she had ever met. She saw why the men of the Circle Lands followed him--one of the notorious witchkin--into the north. She saw why men would follow him still. He had a charisma that was startlingly juxtaposed to his total lack of awareness of it. He was the kind of man that walked off, surprised to find men following behind him.

She wanted him to keep talking and, for some reason, he seemed willing to comply.

"Tell me more about the Paladin."

"What do you want to know?"

"Oh, I don't know. How about telling me more about Barrimore Sael and the travelling you did with him?"

"No," Daryk said uneasily. "What about the history of the Paladin instead?"

Cassie's eyes narrowed. It seemed that the mysterious Daryk Frost had revealed enough about himself tonight.

"All right," she said.

He added a few dead branches to the fire, then nestled himself down close to her. His soothing\unsettling voice lulled her toward sleep, and she began to remember a time when her father would tell her fantastic stories just before bedtime. The nostalgia bothered her a little and she tried to push the memories from her mind. That time was dead. That man was dead.

"According to legend, set down in the *Tome*," he began. "Long, long ago, God sent a savior into the world to combat the Spoiler. He was called the Walker, and no part of Myland was unfamiliar with his feet. Today, we have no first-hand accounts of his life, but many historians tell of a volume that contained all the tales of his exploits. DeCamon called this text, the *Lost Tome*, and most of the stories of the Walker have been reproduced in other works. Tradition maintains that when the Walker went into the north to oppose the Dark One, he gathered his followers together and picked four great warriors. The four went with him into the Spoiler's lair. Only one returned--"

Daryk shook his head.

"It was not the Walker. The man who lived was called Taylor. For days, he wept inconsolably. You see, he had not stayed to fight beside the Walker. He had gazed upon the face of the Dark One and fled. The Walker was dead.

"Three weeks later, legend states that the Walker appeared to Taylor and to the entire court of Daeron (which is rumored to exist beyond the southern sea). The Walker addressed the man, 'Are you not he who deserted me?'

"'Yes,' Taylor answered. 'I am he.'

"'Then grieve for me no longer. I have not died, but have triumphed. Rise and serve me as I once served you.'

"Taylor, needless to say, was confused.

"'But Master,' he protested. 'I abandoned you.'

"Then folklore states that the Walker took him into his arms, saying, 'Yes, but I did not abandon you.'"

"And so Taylor was chosen to be the first Paladin. He reputedly had amazing powers--almost equal to those of the Walker himself. Taylor served as Aan's Paladin wherever he went and spoke to every man in his own tongue. He healed the ailing and protected the afflicted. Legend tells us that he lived nearly two hundred years; perhaps because he had been touched by the Walker, perhaps merely because he was the Paladin.

Legend also states that after the Walker took the Paladin into his service, he told him that he had to leave the earth for a time. The Paladin was distressed. He begged the Walker not to leave the land. He told the Walker that the Spoiler's agents still controlled the northern lands. He told him that mankind would be lost without him.

"'Fear not.' said the Walker. 'You shall be here to guide them.' And when this did not convince the Paladin, he promised, 'I shall hide a small piece of myself upon the earth for you to draw upon.'

"This confused the Paladin.

"'Hide yourself?' he asked. 'But where?'

"'Inside each man's own heart.' the Walker promised. 'Most shall never think to look there.'"

Cassie giggled and nodded at this.

"When the Walker departed the earth, the Paladin founded the Watchmen; followers of God who watched for the return of both the Dark One and the Walker. Although centuries upon centuries have

passed and most men have forgotten the stories of the Walker, the Watchmen remain. Sometimes, I think that they have forgotten what the Walker stood for, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I am no one to judge, in any case.

"When he died, Taylor chose a successor. Yet the duties of the Paladin extended not only to Myland, but to the mysterious lands beyond the sea and sometimes the Paladin would disappear for decades, returning only as he was needed.

"Eanderthall told me that Sael found him just before he set out against the legions of the Spoiler. He told me that the Paladin had somehow chosen him to take his place when he died. He had given Eanderthall *Ithylain*, one of the four blades of Llerand Lley; the one that the Paladins had carried for, what, eight, nine hundred years? Eanderthall told me that he thought Sael would be alive today if he had the sword with him to fight the Daemon Lord."

"You were there," Cassie said. "Would he?"

"No. He was torn apart, he never had a chance."

"Why?"

"I think it has something to do with the kind of man the Paladin is to begin with. Eanderthall, he couldn't have hurt even the most insignificant of creatures. In my dream, he didn't even fight. Sael, I think, was of the same mettle--he practically gave himself up to the Daemon. I didn't understand it. Eanderthall believed that if he answered the Spoiler's violence with violence, then that meant he had lost. So it may just be that the Paladin can't fight that way. Can't win."

"And you?"

"Me?" Daryk smiled bitterly. "I have no such qualms. I am not a fighter, sweetheart, I am a killer. I kill, that's what I do. That's what I've always done. It's what I'm good at. I suppose I could be something different, but then again, I don't know; I've always been better at breaking than building. But maybe I'm just what Aan needs right now. The truly just, noble man spends too much time trying to decide if what he's doing is right-- I just do."

"What if what you do helps the Adversary instead of Aan?"

Daryk stopped. He had forgotten that the princess had been listening in on his dreams.

"I suppose I'll have to find some way to undo it."

"Oh," Cassie said, unsatisfied.

"Look," Daryk said, a little defensively. "I can't apologize for what I am. I try to do what I think needs to be done. That's all I can do. That's all."

They sat in silence then. Cassie could feel the turmoil inside the Greyman. She felt guilty for challenging him like she had. She knew, from his dreams, that he questioned himself quite enough. She wanted to show him that she approved of him, that she didn't think that he was some kind of awful ogre. She paused, startled by the revelation that such a thing mattered to him. She couldn't understand why her opinion of him would matter to the Greyman. But it did. She could feel that. And she was flattered. The man cared nothing for the favor of kings, yet he desired her

understanding. She felt a fluttering warmth suffused within her belly.

"M'lord," she began haltingly. "You told how the Walker placed a little piece of himself inside each of us."

Daryk grunted noncommittally.

"Well, the Saeryn have a similar tale. According to Heniad, they believe that their god, *Umbat-al* (who is similar to our *Aan*), and the evil spirit *Neasch-ea* (either the Adversary or Perian Silvertongue to us) battle for each individual on the earth. They send, not just a piece of themselves inside each person, but entire armies. In some people, the good is better fortified. In some, the evil is better fortified. In many, one side or the other is so deeply entrenched that the opposing side doesn't even attempt to win him or her. But those are the unimportant ones. For the possession of the greatest, *Umbat-al* and *Neasch-ea* battle it out. Neither side will give in because there is so much to lose. That is why the greatest men are often the darkest, the most tempted: they are too important for either side to give up."

He stared at the fire and rubbed his hands together distractedly. She thought he had missed the point. Then he turned to her and squeezed her hand.

"Thank you," he said. "Now get some sleep."

He rose and went to check on the horses once again. Her eyes followed him for a few minutes until she realized that they were drooping pitifully. Talking to the Grey Prince had drained her. She felt exhausted, but content.

As she drifted off to sleep, she thought, *I've given him something. It was a small something, true. But it was a beginning. Someday, she promised herself. We will be even.*

* * * * *

She awoke, either minutes or hours later, to the muted sounds of conversation. In hushed tones, Daryk was discussing the events of late with Devin, who was lamenting the fact that they had no direction, no plan. Devin was also concerned and more than a little frightened at the prospect of going to Whitehall in search of some unknown person.

"Why, if the Silvertongue himself is threatening the Circle Lands, are we going to Whitehall? You know how they'll receive you. Doesn't that scare you?"

"Come on, Dev! The dreams have been right so far. I can't stop believing in them now. Besides, where else would we go? I don't know how to stop the Seeker, do you?"

"You're right," Devin admitted grudgingly. "Still, why don't you let me take care of the accommodations first. Someone might

recognize you. We can't afford any trouble, you know."

"Someone will recognize me eventually; besides, that's not my style. I'm not good at hiding."

"Your damn pride is going to be the death of you yet!"

"Oh, I'm sure it is," Daryk said smiling wryly. "I'm sure it is. Fitting, don't you think?"

Cassie heard Devin rise and walk away from the fire. She could see the Greyman calmly sipping *khazan* a few feet from her. The fire was between them and threw startling shadows across his face. She strained to hear what Devin was doing, trying to discern his movements from the rustle of his clothes.

"They will be hunting you," he whispered in a strange voice.

"Yes."

"They will try to kill you."

"Maybe."

Frost's voice was like his name--icy, unemotional. Devin's voice was just the opposite. It was husky and laden with feeling. But it was also resigned. Cassie thought that he must have argued with the Greyman before, for he spoke without conviction, as if he had no hope of actually talking Daryk out of going to Whitehall.

"You killed those men in Warynn."

"Yes," Daryk said, although it wasn't a question.

"They will be looking for you still."

"They will find me in Whitehall."

Cassie smiled in spite of herself. The man was stubborn!

"How did it feel?" Devin's embarrassed question came.

"What?"

"Killing them. What was it like?"

"Oh. Too damn easy, Dev."

Devin returned to his place by the fire. He struggle for a few moments to get comfortable, then settled. Cassie could see his heavy-booted feet stretched out near the popping flames.

"I wish I could have been there with you. I wish I could have killed some too."

"Ah, my friend. You've always admired the wrong parts of me. Don't worry, you will kill again soon enough."

They spoke no more but merely sat in each other's company, watching the regal flames of the campfire abdicate to the uncouth embers. Disappointed, Cassie succumbed to sleep.

TWENTY-THREE

TWENTY-FOUR

Cassie surveyed the weathered sign hanging tenaciously to the pole outside the dirty little inn.

The Green Drake Inn.

She sighed. The place was a hovel. But it was better than spending another night on the cold, damp ground, she guessed. With any luck, she might even get a decent meal. And a bed! Oh, that would be lovely! A few months younger, she would have refused to stay in a place like this, but now, seeking merely anonymity and warmth, she saw it as a blessing.

Until she stepped inside.

The smoke hit her first, then the smell.

The noxious odor was the unhappy union of all of the Circle Lands: she could smell smokey Vandoraeen tobacco, spilled Fanyddian wine, roasted Tryfallian fowl, sweet Cyfordian incense and pungent Devlin perfume all mixed together into one muddy quagmire of smell. She coughed once, then held her breath against the stench.

Everyone had seemed to stop what they were doing and turn to the doorway. Cassie felt eyes exploring her body's every curve and recess; blood was rushing to her head. They tarried within the entrance, unsure whether or not to proceed. The Greyman was making certain that the horses were being tended to well; Cassie wasn't sure how long he would be.

Devin slid her hand into his massive grip and headed toward one of the back tables. The mass of bodies seemed to swell toward them like the surf. Cassie was amazed at the variety within the multitude.

There were men from the surrounding areas of Warynn, Tolliver and Whitehall, of course; locals from Middleton itself, also; but she saw men that surely were not from anywhere around here. There were the austere Shield-roamers, the few flamboyant Corsairs, two that Cassie suspected were Havenmen, even a lone taciturn dwarf keeping his mead's company in a corner.

They smelled, too.

Cassie guessed that many of them had not bathed in days, some of them even weeks, most of them never.

But Cassie declined rebuking them for their poor hygiene. The men were dangerous. Each and every one had the capacity for murder in their eye, she decided.

The Common was crowded and as they were passing one particularly congested area where Cassie cringed as she felt their filth being pressed against her legs and buttocks, she heard Devin's clumsy apology and the scrape of a chair against the

flagstones. When she turned, she faced three of the largest men she had ever seen. They towered over Devin--who was a huge man himself--glowering down at him with angry eyes.

"What have we here?" their leader, a rusty-haired giant, rumbled. "Someone looking for trouble? It's not polite to strike someone in the head as you pass, my friend."

"I'm sorry," Devin said. "It was an accident."

He drew Cassie up close behind him and transferred his grip on her to his left hand, freeing his swordarm. His hands were clammy, but his voice was steady and his body firm and resolute.

"We were just looking for a place to sit. It has been a tedious journey. Please let us pass."

"It felt like you were looking to sit on me!" the behemoth boomed. The patrons of the inn guffawed at this. Cassie grimaced. That was a bad sign.

"I'd have to find a ladder to climb that high," Devin returned good-naturedly. Once again, there was laughter of approval. One of the scarlet-headed hulk's companions chuckled to himself and sat back down. Most of the people in the Common began to turn away; the red mountain wasn't that easily assuaged.

"Who are you friend, coming in here and attempting to crush some poor unsuspecting bystander by sitting on him? How did you get in here? Did your lady carry you all the way here straight from your mommy's arms?"

Goaded, inciteful laughter.

Cassie felt Devin's body tighten.

"First of all," Devin's tone was different than Cassie had ever dreamed it could be: icy, tough and disdainful. The game had ended, he was playing for real. "I don't believe I could ever crush you by sitting on you, friend. My horse and I combined reach merely half your weight. Secondly, I got in here by walking through the portal. How did you get in here? You are obviously too wide to fit through the doorway. Did they just build the Common around your fatted body? And lastly, speak to and about the lady with respect or I shall cut out your tongue and feed it to you with your next prodigious meal."

Devin was shaking now, but with anger or fear, Cassie wasn't certain. Red Mountain blinked. He wasn't used to anyone speaking to him in such a manner. The companion that had remained standing was nearly buckled over trying to contain his chortles. That didn't help. Red Mountain's face began to darken to the color of his hair. He appeared to be measuring Devin up. Devin was a big man, and strong, but the Mountain was enormous. A low rumble of anticipation swept through the Common. Wood scraped stone as tables of patrons backed away from the two scowling antagonists.

When we reach the Homeland, Cassie thought. I must remember to thank Devin for his chivalry.

The Red Mountain began to advance.

"You are about to be the most regretful man in all of Myland. When I finish with you, your own mother--"

"Enough."

The word was softly spoken, barely heard over the din of the

Common. But it froze everyone--including the Red Mountain--instantly. Cassie turned to see the Greyman framed in the doorway of the Green Drake like a noble posing for a portrait.

He indolently traversed the room, never taking his eyes off Red Mountain.

"Dayel, Judd. Cyrus. Joel, you still owe me a cloak. Dasham, you look good. Rogharm, Reuel. Shortreeve, Rodley, Gaeyle, Kerryll, Letty, Duncan, Schaelly, Merin..."

He knew them all by name. Some he braced with, some he clapped on the shoulder, one he hugged grimly, the rest he merely nodded to. But they all parted before him. When he was halfway across the room, Cassie decided that they moved for him not out of fear, as she had first thought, but out of respect. A respect given only in return for received respect.

Devin had not turned to see Daryk but remained warily vigilant, staring down the Red Mountain, who also ignored the Greyman's approach. When Daryk reached them, he gently placed a reassuring hand on Devin's shoulder.

"Dev, what have you been up to: disturbing the native wildlife? I hear that some of it is pretty aggressive. Not to mention abominably ugly."

The Red Mountain's eyes flicked to Daryk.

"Frost," he greeted him noncommittally.

"Miloe," Daryk returned.

"I thought you had been killed," the giant said. Then a wry grin spread across his face and he added, "Again."

"Miloe, Miloe, Miloe," Daryk reproved, extending his arm.

"You know that the Grey Prince can't be killed."

"Yes," Miloe confessed. "I better than anyone."

They braced, grasping forearms in a show of trust.

"Are these troublemakers with you?"

"I'm afraid so."

He eyed Cassie intently. She was still half-hidden behind Devin, peeking out furtively. Miloe dropped to one knee.

"Princess Cassandra Farrington." He took her tiny hand in his and pressed his lips to it. Even kneeling, the giant was as tall as Cassie. "Miloe Heftlimb of the regal kingdom of Lusterlimn, at your beck and call."

"How--how do you know my name?"

"It was easy enough to guess," he admitted. "The Grey Prince recently stole you away from your father and now has beguiled you with his magic." He shook his head sadly. "It happens all the time."

"It does?"

"Of course! For a time there, he was selling off a princess a month to the slave traders of Cyranderra. Poor, poor girl."

"Stop teasing her, Miloe," Daryk said mock-sternly.

"Truly," the Red Mountain said, rising to his feet. "The Grey Prince is as good a man as he is a fighter--and he's damn good at that--" he added in a conspiratorial whisper behind a shielding hand. "Yes, m'lady, you are keeping good company."

He eyed Devin coolly.

"And this one?"

"Devin Lattimore, Lord of Fanydd," Devin said defiantly, as if the giant were going to dispute the fact.

"My aide," Daryk added.

"Hmmmph."

They did not brace, but merely nodded diffidently to one another.

"And my companions," Miloe gestured to his two towering friends. "Balan and Morgante."

Two massive heads dipped in greeting.

"Well met," Daryk said.

The Greyman peered around distractedly.

"Where is Sweetmeat?" he asked Heftlimb.

"Oh, the little rodent is scurrying around here somewhere. Don't worry, he'll find you and sufficiently lick the mud off your boots ere long."

"We will talk soon, my friend," Daryk promised as he led Cassie and Devin off toward a corner of the Common.

They found an abandoned table, settled down on the uncomfortable benches, and waited.

"Sweetmeat?" Cassie asked, giggling at the almost obscene suggestiveness of the name.

"Like the travelling-candies." Frost's eyes widened and his eyebrows jumped in mock incredulity. "Did you think that it meant...Oh, Cassie! I'm embarrassed!"

She giggled and even Devin dropped his sulky demeanor.

"Sweetmeat is the master of the inn. He is a good man. He will make sure to arrange it so that pretty little body of yours is allowed to recline in comfort tonight."

"In this place?" Cassie asked dubiously.

"You don't buy a sword for its sheath, Cassie. Some goods are greater than their vessels."

"I suppose."

"Frost."

Cassie jumped, startled.

A dour, gnarled creature addressed them humbly, shuffling his feet before their table and kneading his cap. His eyes studied the floor.

"Sweetmeat?" Cassie asked.

Daryk put a hand on her arm to silence her.

"O-theousu," Daryk said in a low, guttural tone, bowing his head. "Teschka Faellyn Daryk Haesel-Tigth, son of Dennis of D'Cathyl, ane-mori."

"Rebakka, ane-mori. Elshander Message-bringer Mountlord, son of Cannie of Darklin, chateka bhe-nami, Teschka."

Daryk reached across the table and clasped hands with the diminutive creature. They nodded to one another.

"I take this isn't Sweetmeat," Cassie said and was ignored. She realized that the creature was the dwarf that she had seen earlier. Somehow, she had expected him to be smaller.

"I have heard your name of late, my brother. In circles that it should remain distant of. There are places where you are not as

well liked as you are here."

"Yes, I have become aware of that through the years, Elshander," Daryk said.

"They say that the Shadowking is moving once again."

"Yes, that is what I heard."

"What are you intending?"

"I am going to Whitehall."

"To raise an army." The dwarf nodded approval.

"No, I don't think so."

"Then what?"

"I'm not sure. I am supposed to aid someone there."

"Who?"

"I'm not sure."

The dwarf frowned, convoluting his face into an ugly fist.

"You are not sure? The Spoiler's masterservant is building his forces. Our spies have seen them." He patted the satchel he was carrying. "That is what I am doing here: I am bound northward, to the Crown Halls. Sindri Manfriend shall be warned of the eminent danger by Message-bringer."

"And then what?"

"He shall raise an army."

"To what end?"

"To destroy Silvertongue!"

"It won't work," Daryk said flatly.

"You are beginning to annoy me, *Teschka*."

"I am serious, Elshander. We lost last time, we will lose this time. To win, we must find a way to decimate Silvertongue entirely. Even if we annihilate his army, he'll grow another."

"Then how do you propose to decimate him?"

"Maybe Sweetmeat knows," Cassie said, flippantly. Once again, her remark was ignored.

"If it is even possible, then I will be told."

The dwarf shook his head.

"You are just as I remember you, *Teschka*. The Shadowking must be crushed by force, not philosophy."

"We've made that mistake once already."

"Bah!" The dwarf turned and stomped back to his table, not bothering to say good-bye.

"Charming personality," Cassie observed. "Almost as nice as Sweetmeat himself."

Cassie's sarcasm didn't arouse a reaction in the Greyman as she had hoped, however, he simply shook his head and smiled a little.

"Elshander and I have never quite gotten along," he said.

"He--like most dwarves--prefers action to contemplation. He feels that I didn't do enough during the Northern Campaign to ensure the safety of the king."

Devin snorted.

"He's a wonderful conversationalist, though," Cassie snapped.

"You didn't even introduce us!"

"Cassie, you have to understand. It would have been an insult to him in this situation. They have a different culture wherein

women play a different role. We must respect that."

"I'll show him what needs to be respected! His people have got to be backwards and stupid to believe--"

"Cassie!" She started at the force in his quiet voice. "His people raised me. They are not stupid nor are they backwards. They are different, that's all."

Reprimanded, Cassie chewed her lip.

"I thought dwarves were smaller anyway," she pouted.

"They are, generally. That's why Elshander has achieved the surname *Mountlord*--because he can ride a full-sized mount."

"I don't understand."

"The dwarves--and the giants of Lusterlimn as well--have a peculiar custom: they acquire their surnames through some act they perform or some other distinguishing characteristic. I am told that men used to do this as well in ancient times but, for unknown reasons, discontinued the practice. The giants choose only one surname for themselves, but the dwarves do it a little differently. Until the first surname is awarded, the dwarf is merely identified by who his father is. The names are given to the young by the elders and the dwarves can procure more surnames throughout their lives. The females have no surnames. They are identified by their fathers or husbands. The older a dwarf gets, the more respected he is, the longer his name. I am told that Sindri Manfriend has nearly a dozen names already. It is a great honor, and they do not take it lightly."

Cassie frowned.

"Well, that's silly; and I don't trust him."

"Believe me Cassie, the dwarves are the most trustworthy race I have ever encountered. We are far more vicious."

"Besides," Devin broke in. "There was no need for him to introduce us. He already saw the introduction. He knows who we are. Unfortunately, so does everyone else."

"Mmmmm. You're right, Dev. We'll be leaving tomorrow early. Hopefully our lack of anonymity won't matter."

Cassie paled a little. She hadn't thought of that. Here they were, pursued by assassins and murderers, and Daryk Frost had to have the magnanimity to announce their presence in the middle of a crowded Common so that the killers might not have too hard a time determining their location. Her face crumpled into a frown. *Sometimes, she decided, it's not exactly desirable to be travelling with a legend.*

"I think perhaps the man I am going to aid might not be from Whitehall at all," Daryk was telling Devin. "What, with the Table Gathering coming up, he could be from any one of the Circle Lands. Perhaps even from Cyranderra."

"Or she," Cassie said.

"What?"

"He, or she. You said you were supposed to help a 'child of God.' How do you know he isn't a she?"

"Well," Daryk stuck his tongue out thoughtfully. "I believe you said he needs my help."

"I did not!"

"In my dream you did."

"Oh," Cassie mumbled.

"How will you know him?" Devin asked.

"I don't know."

"Is there some reason that this particular person needs to be safeguarded?"

"The same reason Cassie needed rescued: he is special in some way. Irreplaceable. Integral."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure."

"Sand and scars, Daryk!" Devin cursed in frustration. "How are we supposed to know what to do if you just keep speaking in riddles and ambiguities?"

"I'm sorry Devin. I can appreciate how perturbing this is, but it's not as simple as just sending a missive to Aan and getting a parchment back from one of his messengers instructing us in our next course of action. The images I receive--and no, I'm not positive that they come from God, they could just as easily be emanating from the other--the images are not complete. They are fragmented, disjointed. Here."

He stood and put a hand over Devin's eyes. He stood the big man up and turned him to his left. They took three steps forward and the Greyman removed his hand.

"What do you see?" Daryk asked his aide.

"Come now, Daryk. This is ridiculous. How--"

"What do you see?"

Devin was about an inch away from a poorly woven tapestry. Directly in front of his nose, he could see a glittering vermilion toe. Actually, it was more of a talon; it had claws dripping crimson and golden stalks flowing from its grasp.

"I don't know. Maybe a wingdrake's claw?"

Daryk pulled him back two steps.

"Now what do you see?"

"Tarasque the Red!" Devin exclaimed, immediately recognizing the piece. It depicted a terrible red dragon devouring the innocents of a small village. The stalks he had seen were tufts of blonde hair sprouting from the windrake's grip. In the next scene, the demise of the monster was portrayed. King Gaemes stood triumphantly atop the beast's chest, his sword, *Lemrith* (the "dragonslayer"), buried deep in the nightmare's breast. It was a well-known piece that was often reproduced.

"You can see it much better now, can't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"That's the way my dreams are, too. In all of them, I am part of what's happening. Submerged. Engrossed. I suppose that if I could just take a step back, I would comprehend completely. But I am afforded no such luxury. So, like you just did, I see a piece of the picture and have to guess the rest."

"So we're in search of a red dragon's toe?"

Daryk laughed.

"Something like that."

They sat back down.

"Okay, so what are we supposed to do when we reach Whitehall?"

"I don't know, but I will once we are there."

"I'll bet Sweetmeat knows," Cassie chimed in.

"Would you please stop harping on this damned Sweetmeat person?!" Devin snapped a little sharply.

"Mind yourself when talking to me," Cassie rebuked him light-heartedly. "You heard the man: I'm special."

"Especially trying, you mean."

Cassie giggled. Devin, despite his best efforts, found a timid smile tugging the corners of his mouth upward.

"When we arrive in Whitehall, Cassie," Daryk instructed. "I want you to wear your my doublet over your head. One of Devin's tunics should fit loosely enough to disguise your sex. Here it doesn't matter as much if people know who we are--in Whitehall it could be deadly. You will act as our page and pretend..."

He stopped as a small, confident man approached them. His hair and beard were red--not quite as dark as Miloe Heftlimb's mop--and his clothes were teal and black. Both his raiment and his accoutrements were finely crafted and expensive looking.

"Sweetmeat?" Cassie asked once again. The guarded aspects of both Devin and the Greyman told her that he was not.

"Greetings, my friends," he addressed them in a relaxed, self-assured voice. "May I join you?"

"To our honor," Daryk replied, much to Cassie's surprise.

The interloper pulled a chair up to the table and reversed it, sitting with his chin resting on its arched back. Cassie saw that although he was short--barely over five feet tall--he was incredibly well muscled. He wasn't stocky like a dwarf, however, but broad-shouldered and slim-waisted like an elf. Yet his arms and chest had too much bulk for him to have descended from the sleek fey peoples. His grey eyes glittered shrewdly.

"You," he smiled at Daryk. "You are the one they call the Grey Prince, are you not?"

"How did you know that?"

"Well, you recently announced it to the world."

"No," Daryk said firmly. "You weren't here."

The man looked as if he were about to argue.

"You are right," he finally acceded. "A friend pointed me in your direction. I wanted to ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"I couldn't help but notice the mounts your party rode in on. Fine Devlin steeds. And one Cyfordian warhorse if I'm not mistaken. How much do you want for them?"

"Thunderbird isn't for sale!" Devin advised him fervently.

"You want her, you'll have to take her from me."

The man's eyes glinted like steel.

"That can be arranged."

"We're not interested, my friend," Daryk inserted diplomatically. "We are on our way to Whitehall; we need the transport."

"Ah, to Whitehall. Not to partake in the abominable Table Gathering, I hope?"

"No."

"Good." He turned to Cassie. "And how about you, Princess? Isn't it a little strange that you are traipsing around in the company of you abductor?"

Nonplussed by the diminutive man knowing her identity and frightened by thoughts of his intent, Cassie nonetheless answered him undauntedly.

"He is my liberator, not my abductor."

He didn't argue.

"And what a fine liberator at that: the famous Daryk Frost. The Grey Prince. The Talisman."

"Infamous, last time I heard," Daryk said.

"Yes, yes, yes." the man mused.

"Well," Daryk said. "If you have no other business with us, m'lord, I see that our rooms are ready."

A stout, ruddy-faced man was waddling in their direction.

"Of course, of course." He rose. "I wouldn't want to keep you." He placed the chair beside the table he had stolen it from.

"One last time: will you not accept my offer?"

"No!" Devin asserted vehemently.

Daryk raised his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I'm sorry, we can't"

"Ah, well. You can't say that I didn't offer like a gentleman," the man turned to go.

"M'lord?"

He turned.

"Yes."

"You know my name but I don't know yours. How shall I call you the next time we meet?"

The small man grinned engagingly.

"Gwydion. Gwydion Redlance Tourellaine."

Daryk extended his arm and they braced.

"Well met, Tourellaine."

"Well met, Daryk Frost."

He turned and pushed past a man who was almost as short as he but nearly three times as wide. The fat man's face was tired but animated. He hustled up to the table and nodded to Daryk.

"M'lord. I am sorry it took so long but we have been remarkably busy. I prepared a room the minute you arrived. I hope it is adequate."

His wheezy voice was pleasantly guileless and his manner distractedly conscientious. Cassie would have guessed that he always looked a little dishevelled and out of breath.

"Don't worry, Sweetmeat," Daryk remarked reassuringly. "We haven't been bored. Your patrons have graciously kept us entertained."

"Yes, I was afraid of that," Sweetmeat replied good-humoredly. Frost laughed.

"I suppose you should--"

"You are Sweetmeat?" Cassie interrupted his rejoinder.

The man stepped back uncertainly.

"Yes, I am."

"Well!" Cassie rejoiced theatrically. "My lord, I am elated to finally have the fortuitous pleasure of your acquaintance."

"Why, thank you."

"I have heard so much about you! You know, I was told that you might even be able to procure for me some Fanyddian perfumes for my warm bath. If that is true, well I would see you as no less than a miracle-worker!"

Sweetmeat looked anxious for a moment, then his jowls sprang into a smile.

"Of course," he wheezed. "We can arrange something, my child, Right this way."

Cassie took his arm and looked back over her shoulder with a self-satisfied smirk.

Daryk rolled his eyes.

Sweetmeat led the three of them into the innards of the Green Drake, chatting garrulously with Cassie. Devin leaned toward Daryk and whispered to him.

"Why did you bother with that buffoon?"

"Who?"

"Well, they're all buffoons, now that you mention it, but I was speaking specifically of Tourellaine."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Daryk! The man's either a fool or a miscreant."

"Even fools and miscreants have something to say, Dev."

"Nothing worth hearing."

"If you say so."

Sweetmeat opened a thick, iron-bound oak door revealing a large room, possibly the largest in the inn. Candles were placed intermittently throughout the chamber, casting light into even the farthest corners. A large, canopied bed dominated the room. On the far wall, a bevelled glass window framed the rear lot of the inn. Dark had fallen outside.

"I was not informed that m'lord had needed more space than this," Sweetmeat fretted. "I can provide the lady with a separate room, but I'm afraid it will be at the other end of the wing. All the other rooms are occupied."

"No," Daryk said. "That won't be necessary."

"Very good."

Cassie thought it was interesting that the portly Inn Master didn't question him, but apparently, the man prided himself on his service and confidentiality toward his patrons.

"And how long will you be staying?"

"Just tonight."

"Leaving?"

"Early. Before dawn."

"Dinner?"

"Yes, please. In here, if you don't mind."

"Excellent."

As the men discussed the lodgings, Cassie ascertained that the two had been doing business for quite some time. Both were concise without being curt; efficient without being aloof. She also decided that Sweetmeat was far more capable than she had first

guessed. Dinner was excellent and Cassie's bath was perhaps the most soothing and satisfying one she had ever taken. The Greyman offered her and Devin the bed, opting to sleep on the floor and Devin, embarrassed rather than chivalrous, joined him. The bed was wonderful. Cassie stretched sumptuously beneath the satiny sheets and soft covers. Just before she surrendered to slumber, she wondered how she could have ever had problems falling asleep.

TWENTY-FIVE

Ashley Rowe looked down on Whitehall.

It was the most magnificent city she had ever seen. Its turreted walls shone brightly in the light, nearly blinding Ashley when the sun caught it right (which was most of the time). It was called David's Triumph, Myland's Jewel, the Spired City, the Castle of Light. It was the hub of the Circle Lands, the seat of the High King, the center of the world. It was beautiful.

It was her destiny.

She could feel it. She knew it. Here was where her life would change forever. She would enter the magnificent city as a nobody--the daughter of a thief. She would leave as a somebody.

She wasn't sure how or why, but she knew she would. And her assurance rested within her weathered satchel, snuggled among her other meager possessions. It was hope. It was opportunity. And yes, it was stolen.

It was a harp.

Not just any harp, mind you, but a special one. True, it had no strings and the wood was badly scarred, but the signet mark was there, validating its authenticity.

The old instrument was slightly bowed and the color was fading in some places but even so, Ashley recognized it. She had gazed at countless representations of the harp, longing for it, longing for the skill of its master. Dreaming of being a Journeyman Shaper. Praying to be chosen to go to Fanydd. The harp was a symbol to Ashley, an icon that spoke to her of success. And now it was hers.

It was called Pitchward, and long ago it belonged to Ballad the Mastershaper. It was reputed to be the purest instrument ever made. Ashley figured that if it retained even half of the quality it once enjoyed, she would soon be the greatest Shaper in all of Myland. All she needed were strings and an audience.

Whitehall could provide both.

It took all she had to keep herself from running down into the city tonight. But she restrained herself. By the time she made it to the gates, the portcullis would have been dropped and the guards posted. The questioning and inevitable search was something she thought worth avoiding. If she waited until morning and blended in with the steady influx of people pouring into Whitehall for the Table Gathering, she could evade the uncomfortable suspicions by becoming only a blur in the mass. She could gain what she really needed right now--

Anonymity.

All her life, Ashley had been forced to bear the weight of the

world's eyes--being her father's daughter had something to do with that--and now all she wanted was to be unremarkable. Inconspicuous. Plain.

Ashley Rowe was anything but plain.

Her long, flowing hair was a golden-red that alone would have made her extraordinary. Yet the rest of her was equally splendid and distinctive. Her body had developed early, blessing or cursing her with full, high breasts and full, flaring hips. Her legs were muscled yet feminine, her body strong yet slender. Her skin was pleasantly tanned and her teeth straight and white.

She matured quickly, her mind and emotions chasing after her body. She lost her virginity at twelve and swiftly discovered the pleasure and the power to be attained in bed. She used her body shrewdly. As with everything, she acted intelligently and with restraint, sometimes acting impetuously but never acting imprudently. In this way she was like her father: calculating.

Her eyes were also her father's.

Grey. Glittering. Dangerous.

And yes, beautiful. They were the kind of eyes that mysteriously cleared away even the most carefully prepared speeches; the kind of eyes that flipped stomachs and dried tongues; the kind of eyes that broke hearts.

Exactly the kind of eyes that Ashley did not want.

She had never been interested in love. It wasn't something that she had been brought up to believe in. Love was nothing more than juices flowing to certain parts of your body. It wasn't something that she knew, definitely not something she wanted to know. It was just another way to use someone.

And she didn't like being used.

So instead she made sure that she was the one in control, getting what she wanted. And she was pretty good at it, after all, she had been taught how to be a user by the best.

Her father.

She gritted her teeth.

She didn't want to think about him anymore.

The sun was descending on the Spired City and it would soon be dark. Ashley roused herself to begin preparations for the night. She rolled up her hair and tucked it into her peaked calotte, securing the helmet by tying a knot beneath her chin. She had seen several campfires nearby. It would not have been very good if an over-friendly traveller wandered into her campsite before she could once again prepare her male persona.

When she finally put her head down to sleep, her neck was stretched to an uncomfortable angle. But sleep eventually came and with it visions of Whitehall. She slept soundly.

* * * * *

There was a soft knock at Denna's door.

She rose and approached the portal. As she passed a mirror, she caught her own reflection. It startled her. She looked very haggard and worn. And old.

Old. Never in her thirty-four years had she looked old. But she certainly did now. Her cheeks were parchment-pale, her eyes inky, the sockets charcoal grey. She reminded herself of a wilted rose, once lovely and now all the more ugly because of that former beauty. She tried to tuck her wispy hair back behind her ears to keep it from her face, but that only accentuated her pallor. Internally cursing, she dipped her head roughly. She had inherited her mother's beauty. The fair skin, the fair eyes, the fair hair. The delicate features.

She had always been critically proud of her inheritance. And had felt no qualms about using her attractiveness to gain what she wanted. She was scrupulously honest but felt that her looks were merely another of her attributes to be utilized. That was how she won Gregory. She had found him to be the most handsome, sensitive, dependable, brave, loving man that she had ever met. The day she met him she knew that she wanted him and she used everything she had to get him. But now she had lost both her beauty and her Gregory.

Because Daddy's dead.

The news had come almost two weeks ago, his body a few days after that. He had been found in the old section of Warynn in an old abandoned chamber of the crumbling bastion. They said that Daryk did it. That the Grey Prince murdered him before he stole away with the princess of Warynn.

Denna hated thinking of her Gregory dying in the hands of the witchkin. It scared her. If the Talisman had ventured far enough into the realm of insanity to kill Gregory, then Denna feared that he might have found a way to injure his soul as well.

She prayed that he had not.

Daryk had always possessed a little madness in him. Yes, Denna had sensed it from the day she met him. But he truly cared for Gregory, she had no doubt about that. What could twist a man so horribly? She did not know.

Unbolting the door, she pulled back the heavy wood to discover the handsomest man she had ever known standing on the other side. His eyes were the grey-blue of clear streamwater; his hair was a downy blonde; his face shockingly handsome. He could have been Denna's brother.

But he wasn't.

"Lleric!" she half-exclaimed, half-sobbed, collapsing into his arms. "Oh, Lleric! Why? Why?"

He gently pushed her back inside and shut the door. He held her as she cried, saying soothing words and stroking her hair. She clung to him as if she were drowning and he reciprocated. Publicly she had managed to remain composed and dry-eyed; privately she was a mess. She tried not to cry because it upset the children, but when she was alone she simply couldn't help it. Her anguish was

intensified because her family and closest friends were all away from her. Of course, she had friends in Whitehall and they did what they could, but sometimes you need more than consoling words. Sometimes you need to have someone suffering as much as you. Someone who not only sympathizes but empathizes.

Denna hated herself for feeling it, but she only wanted to see someone crying as hard about Gregory as she was.

She was getting that now.

Lleric's warm tears coursed down her cheek, occasionally splashing on her eyelids, threading through her eyelashes. She noticed how firm he felt, how strong, how anchored.

Strange, intense, yet comforting thoughts bombarded her brain, moved her body. An untimely desire clenched her.

She pushed Lleric away tenderly before she gave action to those thoughts. No, she didn't need that kind of solace.

She retreated to a cushion perched on the sill of the chamber's high-arched window. Lleric followed and seated himself opposite her. He put a warm hand on her knee.

"How are you doing?"

"How do I look like I'm doing?" Denna snuffled. "I cry every time I think about him, I mope every time I don't, I look terrible, I feel terrible--"

"Oh, come on! You look beautiful, as always."

"Thanks," Denna touched his hand. "You're sweet. But you're also a liar."

She smiled gratefully to him. Lleric had always been someone who drew her. He was unfailingly kind, courteous and thoughtful toward her. He cared for the children, cared for animals and cared for other people. He was probably the most giving man Denna knew.

As a matter of fact, if it hadn't been for Gregory, she might have married Lleric Ashe. Except for two things: his cynicism and his friends. He was a very sarcastic man, often humorously so, she admitted, but she didn't want to raise children with someone like that. And the company he kept was sometimes very ill-chosen. Perhaps that was because he tried to be friends with everyone--well, everyone except Daryk Frost--and often seemed to exercise what Denna thought was poor judgement. Right now, he was keeping the company of Reynald Tym-Waltyr, the Master-regent. He was acting as the Magus' assistant and took on several duties that previously fell under the auspices of the chancellor of Whitehall.

Denna had only known Tym-Waltyr for a little over four weeks, but she just did not like him. Nor did she trust him. She worried about Lleric being hurt by his ties to the man. He was a deceitful, egotistical, beady-eyed political administrator and every time she saw him, Denna had to fight the urge to pinch his big nose until that bored, condescending look disappeared from his face.

In her heightened emotional state, Denna hated him profoundly. She hated most people right now, if she were to admit the truth. But not Lleric.

He had just returned to Whitehall. He had been gone for nearly two months finalizing the preparations for the Table

Gathering. Denna could tell that he had just arrived and come straight here. Although he was dressed in fine court garments, tiny specks of mud spotted his shins, ankles and feet.

He stroked her knee.

"I want you and the children to come over to an apartment adjoining mine," Lleric told her. "Leave all your things and just move in."

"Oh, Lleric, that's nice, but I can't."

"Denna, you need to get away from these chambers for a while. It will help you forget him."

"I don't want to forget him."

"Denna, you need to get on with your life. Gregory would have wanted you to. Think about the children, they need a father. You need a husband."

"Gregory is the only husband I'll ever have."

"Oh."

Denna realized how harsh her tone had been and grasped Lleric's hand.

"I'm sorry. It's just hard to think about doing anything without him. It hurts so much."

She began to cry again and Lleric pulled her close.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. You're right. We'll move."

She could feel the muscles of his cheek against her forehead pull up into a smile.

"Good," he said. "It's for the best, believe me."

* * * * *

Ashley awakened screaming.

Pain squeezed her into a tight fetal ball. She tried to open her eyes. Succeeding, she saw a steel-tipped boot swinging at her eye. She turned her head in barely enough time to avoid being blinded. The boot collided with her temple explosively. She fought to remain conscious. Blood streamed down her cheek, slicking down her hair and filling her ear. She rolled over and tried to cover her head as best she could.

Blows were raining down on her like arrows from an archery unit. From the speed and number of attacks, Ashley guessed that there were several men punching and kicking her. From the force of the impact, Ashley guessed that there were several big men attacking her. If she could only get her sword out...

But she couldn't. She couldn't even rise. Each blow slammed her against the unyielding earth, pinning her down. It was all she could do to keep from vomiting.

Finally, when the cessation came, she could only lie there and cry as quietly as her pride would allow her. Her right arm was

broken, she could feel that, and probably some of her ribs. Other than that, though, she couldn't be sure of the injuries she'd sustained until she saw a Healer.

Please, Aan, she prayed. Don't let them take the harp. Please have them leave Pitchward.

Cracking open her eyes, she saw Steel-tip standing about three feet away. If she had possessed the strength, she would have cut those boots right off his damn feet. Instead, she rolled weakly onto her back. That made her breathing a little less labored. She could hear Steel-tip barking orders.

"Bardulf, Peto, Pistyl. Quickly search the hill. If we're going to camp, I want to make certain that no one is about. Jem, check to see how bad he's hurt."

Make camp? Why would the thieves need to make camp?

A raven-haired young man materialized above Ashley. He looked concerned and disgusted.

"Sand and scars, Jerroll. Did you have to club him so much. By the Walker, he's bleeding all over the place."

"Lord Malcolm told us to make him hurt, that's what we did. Besides, after the number he pulled, I owed him."

An ugly bald and bearded face loomed over Ashley, leering at her through yellow teeth.

"Don't I, my friend?"

The face looked familiar, but Ashley couldn't place it. However, with the face came sudden revelation. Swirling up from her sea of pain came the insistent undertow of fear. These men were not merely brigands. Nor were they slave-traders.

They were mercenaries. Hired blades.

And they felt somehow that they owed her. She closed her eyes, begging for a clue as to how she might have wronged these men. She couldn't think clearly. Her head was spinning.

Raven-hair was speaking to her in low tones.

"Come, m'lord. I need you to stop moving. You're going to hurt yourself even more if you don't lie still. Yes, yes. That's better. Jerroll, you oaf! You're just lucky one of you asses didn't snap his spine. Oh, Aan, look at this."

Jerroll, Steel-tip, seemed unconcerned.

"I don't think Lord Malcolm would have minded terribly."

Raven-hair's lip curled.

"Sand and scars. Someday, uncle. Someday you're going to go too far. Here, here. Listen to me, friend. I must set your arm. It is going to hurt, but I need you to relax for me."

"It already hurts," Ashley croaked through swollen lips.

Raven-hair smiled grimly, "Yes."

Then he wrenched her arm. She screamed. In her mind, she saw the fleeting image of her arm being completely ripped off. Then everything went grey.

Slowly the pain began to subside.

She could hear Raven-hair speaking, but she couldn't make out the words. His calloused but gentle hands explored her, tracing her body. Numbly, she knew that there was some reason that she should be trying to stop him but she couldn't remember what it was.

She felt his fingers in her mouth, feeling each tooth. Intact, every one of them. She was glad. She had very pretty teeth. His fingers pressed her cheeks--which were already swelling--and tenderly examined the wound beside her right eye. He checked her jaw and the base of her skull beneath her tightly fitted calotte. His hand then glided down her chest and stomach to her legs. She barely felt his touch through the heavy link mail she wore. She winced when he prodded her left knee.

"Does that hurt?"

She opened her mouth, but no response came. She felt his hands tugging at the drawstrings of her tunic then pulling back the mail. Then they were on her stomach, fiery-warm. They pushed down into either side of her trousers first, feeling her hip bones. Then they slid up across her sore stomach to her ribs. The warmth of his hands was nothing compared to the fire there. She saw him grimace and heard him curse. It must have been pretty bad. He fingered each rib individually and although she knew he was being as gentle as possible, even his lightest touch made her want to scream in agony. Then his hands slid up to her sternum and out across her breasts. They paused there.

Oh yeah, that's why I needed to stop him.

His hands slipped down to her waist again. She felt a chill as the cool night air snuck up her shirt. He lifted the tunic and mail high enough to peer beneath.

"Oh Aan," he groaned. She opened her eyes to see him gazing down at her slightly embarrassed and extremely perplexed. He rocked back on his haunches.

"Jerroll, are you sure this is the one? I think you've made a big mistake."

"I don't make mistakes, pup. That's the one."

"How can you be so sure?"

"This," Ashley heard Steel-tip say. "I'd recognize this sheath anywhere. Besides, I'd recognize that man anywhere."

Raven-hair scoffed.

"Well, all right. So you don't make mistakes. Fine. But just so you'll know, this man that you say you'd recognize anywhere--" He unlaced the calotte and eased it from her head, revealing her flowing red hair. "Is a woman."

Jerroll stared dumbfounded for a moment. Then he barked a nasty, derisive laugh.

"You sneaky, malicious little whore!" he growled. "You bitch! I can't believe we all fell for it!"

He advanced, his eyes gleaming half in anger, half in delight. "The little slut had us all thinking she was a man! Oh, that is funny! Did you like it, honey? Did you enjoy it? Well, who's the fool now, huh? Who's laughing now?"

"Let it alone, Jerroll."

"I'll let it alone when I feel like letting it alone, you little whelp!"

Raven-hair did not relent. He bent over her body, shielding her from Steel-tip's boots.

"I've got work to do. Leave it."

"Not likely!" Jerroll said and kicked Raven-hair squarely in the back. The young man grunted but didn't move. He kicked him again. To the same effect. Ashley heard another voice call from far away, "Come on, Jerroll. Let it alone. It'll be harder on us if the pup tells his uncle that we've been harassing him." She heard Jerroll's grumble; heard him kick Raven-hair once more on principle; heard him walk away; then heard no more.

She had finally blacked out.

* * * * *

She awoke to find her right arm splinted and her ribs wrapped. Raven-hair was nearby.

"How are you doing? Are those comfortable."

She nodded weakly. She hurt all over.

"Don't worry," he said. "You'll feel worse tomorrow."

She smiled. Even that hurt. She could hear the other mercenaries yelling to each other across a fire that they must have built while she was unconscious.

"Broach."

"Mine."

"Belt."

"Yeah."

"Now wait a minute. You got the last one."

"I'll let you have it if you give me the sword."

"Not a chance."

"What if I throw in the saddle bags?"

"No."

"Then quit crying."

"What about this?"

"The lyre?"

"Yeah."

Ashley tried to sit up.

"Toss it in the fire, we need more firewood."

"No," she whimpered weakly.

Raven-hair glanced down at her and, seeing her struggling to rise, placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Easy."

"No," she repeated. "Harp."

He looked up. One of the men was about to drop the harp onto the flames.

"Wait," he said. "I haven't asked for anything. I would like the harp."

Steel-tip sprang up like an eager predator.

"Would you now, pup?"

Ashley forced herself up on her elbows. Steel-tip's eyes

glowed eerily in the firelight. He snatched the harp from his crony's hands.

"You know, Jem," he smirked. "Suddenly I've grown quite attached to this lyre. What is it worth to you?"

"Two pieces."

"Hall gold?"

"Sure."

"Ten."

"Five."

"Ten, and you'll care my horse for a week."

Raven-hair considered this for a moment. It was obvious to Ashley that the youth wasn't the wealthiest of men. In this part of the Circle Lands, ten pieces of Hall gold was a lot of money.

"All right," he said at last.

Ashley exhaled.

"Here," Steel-tip said, extending his arm. Raven-hair rose to grab the harp, but before he could reach it, the muscles in Steel-tip's arm twitched. There was a sharp *snap!* and the harp split asunder.

"Oops!" Jerroll sniggered, and dropped the harp into the flames. Raven-hair reached for it but the flames had already claimed it for their own. Within seconds, Pitchward--Ballad's harp, Ashley's hope--was consumed. She felt the edges of her awareness grow fuzzy as she watched her destiny melt before her.

She screamed.

"No!"

TWENTY-SIX

Daryk awoke with a start.

He was sweating profusely but felt cold. So cold. He looked around the bedchamber confusedly. For a moment, he wasn't sure where he was. Then he remembered. He let out a small sigh. The room was dark, rife with shadows. The fear that had fettered him in his dream had not quite released him yet. He felt exposed. Vulnerable. Trying to coax his heart into slowing down, he glanced about the room. Devin was snoring softly beside him, lying on his back with his knees pulled up. He could see Cassie's amorphous form clumped in shadow within the bed's canopy. Beyond her, he could see the light from a distant torch ricocheting through the beveled glass of the window. He rose and walked to the window. Still feeling uneasy, he looked outside.

And froze.

Illuminated by Myland's blue moon, the rear lot of the Green Drake glowed with an eerie luminescence. The building formed a block U around the courtyard, surrounding the grassy area on three sides by the four story building. A small, nearly bare tree grew close to the wall opposite Daryk. It was raining outside and occasionally, as if in sympathy, the tree would rain a leaf or two down upon the spongy, sodden ground.

About fifteen feet from the tree, right next to the wall, stood another figure which, at first, might be mistaken for a tree or a tall shrub or a particularly dense shadow.

But it wasn't.

Daryk watched the inky splotch for nearly another five minutes before it moved again. It effortlessly scaled the wall, levitating nearly twenty feet in the air. The dark figure stealthily opened a window on the second floor and stole inside. Only after it had disappeared inside did Daryk see the rope draped over an extended eave high above. A wintry chill blew through his torso as a name floated across the courtyard, unspoken by autumn's breath.

Daevlyn Temyn.

The Dark Servant. Silvertongue's highest officer. The Spoiler's Paladin. Daryk licked his lips. He had dreamt of Temyn killing Eanderthall. He was here to kill again. Slowly, he withdrew from the window and navigated the tenebrous room to the door. Locked. The Dark Servant could have been there to assassinate anyone.

But he wasn't.

He was after them.

First he woke Devin, then Cassie. He told them to keep the

lights out. They dressed in silence, asking no questions. When their gear was travel-ready, Daryk told them what he saw.

"We need to get out of here. Quickly"

"I disagree," Devin said. "He's going to just keep after us. We need to confront him now, when he's not expecting it. He doesn't know that we're aware of him yet--we can take him by surprise. We're going to have to do it sooner or later. Why not attack him instead of letting him come after us?"

"I think Devin's right," Cassie offered. "I've seen you with a sword. You're one of the best, you--"

"And what if Teyn is the best? What if he kills me, what then? No, I don't think so. You two are forgetting that he also has the power of a master Erudite wizard. And no matter how wondrous and fantastic the tales about Talismanic magic, I would be no match for him. We would be ripped apart."

That sunk in.

They understood, perhaps for the first time, the seriousness of their endeavor. The strength of their enemy. Their own frailty.

Daryk noted that Cassie was hugging herself tightly. She was scared. Really scared. Unknown assassins were one thing, but knowing that the masterservant's black priest was stalking you--minutes away--was quite another matter. Suddenly, the reality of their undertaking hit her and she was taking it hard.

Good, he thought. *The sooner she learns, the better. This isn't a game. It's for real. The risk is real, the threat is real, the danger is real. Some of us will die. Maybe all of us. But we might have a chance if we can master our fear.*

"All right," Daryk murmured to them in the darkness. "Along with the bad, we may have some good. I think I have figured out the puzzle. I can't stand back from it to see the whole picture, but I think I have enough pieces to begin putting everything together. As I have told you, I dreamt that Teyn had killed the Paladin and taken his sword. Remember, I also told you that the Dark Servant wielded *Tarilayn*, the Queen-sword of the Four. Well, tonight I had a dream that told me where we might find the King-blade itself!"

"Dauvendrake?"

Daryk nodded.

"The death-sword."

"But the blade has been lost for--how long now--nearly a millennium?"

"Ever since Gurggi the man-beast took it."

"That's right," Cassie said, remembering the tale from DeCamon's *History of Myland*. "King David had been overcome by the power of the blade. He ventured to Ashentop, into Higheyre itself, intending to defeat Silvertongue once and for all with the assistance of the King-blade. But Silvertongue was too strong for him and twisted him to his service. In the end, it was Gurggi the man-beast--reportedly the most timorous creature alive--that had the courage to confront the Spectre-king. Legend says that because of his ferocious love for King David and his valiant recklessness,

he saved the king from the puppetry of the Silvertongue as well as the pollution of the death-sword. According to the story, he could only get King David to release the sword by cutting off the king's hand. When the sword fell free of him, the king was delivered from its enchantment. The two escaped Ashentop and set off down the Landwash through the Sablen Forest, leaving the Shadowking and the death-sword behind. But the poison of the Dauvendrake was at work within King David. He knew that he was about to die, so he charged Gurggi with ridding the world of the King-blade.

"The story tells us that the king died somewhere in the Sablen and his bier was sent down the Mistveil Falls and eventually out of Myland. Gurggi the man-beast then crept north again and reentered the Spoiler's lair. He won the King-blade in a furious battle against an entire hoard of monsters and escaped once again down the Landwash. No one knows what happened to either the sword or the man-beast, but the ballads sing that the ghost of the creature guards over the bastardsword even to this day. It was a very sad story."

"Well I'm afraid we are going to have to wake Gurggi's ghost," Daryk said. "We are going after the sword."

"Are you crazy?" Devin asked. "The Dauvendrake was too powerful for King David! We won't even have a chance against its potency! Besides, we still have to save this *special* person from Whitehall."

"Yes, you're right," Daryk stuck out his tongue and squeezed his eyes shut. "Okay. Okay. Let me rephrase that then: you are going after that sword."

Devin balked.

"Me? I can't do it! You're the only one that might be able to control the blade. Besides, I don't know where to go; I'm not prepared for a true journey; I need--"

"Dev," the Greyman said softly. "You're the only one. You were right, I must go to Whitehall. But I can tell you where you will find it and how best to get there. You can stock up for your journey in Tolliver. You won't have to touch the blade--I promise! Believe me, I wouldn't ask you if there were any other way. But there isn't, and we don't have time to discuss it. I need you to say yes, Dev, but I won't make you go if you don't want to. What do you say?"

"I think you need me to stay with you."

"We'll be fine."

"But how do you know this is what we're supposed to do?"

"I don't *know*--"

"Well, then maybe we're supposed to stay together and go after the death-sword after Whitehall."

"Dev--we haven't time for this."

"What if you're wrong."

"I'm not."

"What if you are? Everyone is wrong sometime--"

"I'm *not* wrong."

Devin stared off to his left, lost in his thoughts. Finally, his eyes refocused and he nodded almost imperceptibly.

"All right. I'll do it."

"Great! Now we need to get moving. It wouldn't do for us to turn a corner and run into the Dark Servant. Hopefully, it will take him some time to find out where we are; even then he'll need to swipe a key from someone to get through the doors to the wing. First thing we need to do is procure some good mounts. He has his steed and we'll never outdistance him on foot. Dev, why don't you--"

"Whoa!" Devin protested. "What are you talking about?"

Daryk looked bewildered a moment.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Our horses have been stolen."

"What?" Devin and Cassie said in unison.

There was a thunderous beating at the door. They all jumped. It came again. Daryk unsheathed his witchblade and slid over to the door.

"Don't," Cassie pleaded.

"I hardly think that Teymyn will knock when he comes for us," he said and looked out the peephole.

He quickly unbolted the lock and stepped out into the corridor. He returned dragging a flustered Sweetmeat with him. Once inside, he rebolted the door.

"I am so sorry, m'lord," Sweetmeat wheezed earnestly. "But it wasn't our fault! They took them all; every last one of them."

"What are you talking about?" Devin asked irritably.

"Why, your horses. Someone has stolen your horses."

Devin stared at Daryk.

"You know, you really spook me sometimes."

"I know. Sometimes I spook myself."

Cassie frowned.

"It must have been that Gwydion character that took them. After all, he was so interested in them."

"I'll kill him if he hurts mt Thunderbird," Devin said.

"He sure picked a bad time to go horse-napping," Cassie observed ruefully.

Daryk nodded.

"Yes, it is inopportune."

He told Sweetmeat of their need to leave--quickly and inconspicuously. To Cassie's surprise, he even told the fat little man why. After a moments consideration, the plump Inn Master returned to the door with a sudden resolve.

"If you follow the corridor outside to your left," he told them. "You will come to a small niche just before the stairs. I have placed a tray in front of it and piled storage drums inside it, but if you squeeze past the barrels, you will find a small portal that swings backwards into a tunnel. The tunnel leads outside to the stables. I use it to check on the guests horses without having to circle the building. Wait until I've been gone a moment. If I don't come back and knock within a minute, stay put. When I do knock, wait another thirty seconds, then go to the passageway."

He paused a moment, appearing worried and confused, as if he had forgotten something.

"Sweetmeat," Daryk said. "Thank you."

The Inn Master closed his eyes and dipped his head.

"Be well."

He opened the door and peered down the hall, finally stepping out into the corridor. He winked at them. Then he was gone. Daryk slid the bolt home, securing the door again. Devin started as if struck.

"Wait," he said reaching for the door. "What if he accidentally runs into Temyr?" He held out his sword. "He could use this."

Daryk laid a hand on his arm.

"Sweetmeat can take care of himself. Be assured, he is armed. And don't worry. Sweetmeat is one of the most cunning fighters I've ever seen."

Cassie looked at him skeptically.

"Him?"

"Haven't I told you?" Daryk admonished her. "You don't buy a sword--"

"You don't buy a sword for its sheath, I know."

A soft knock.

They all looked at one another. Then Daryk grabbed his supplies and threw them on his back. The other two followed his example. They stood shuffling their feet uncomfortably, straining to hear the footfalls that would herald the approach of the murderer. A full minute passed.

"Let's go."

Daryk eased the door open and stuck his head out into the corridor. For one nightmarish instant, Cassie imagined what his decapitated body would look like slumping to the floor. Then he was grabbing her hand and the terrible vision receded. He pulled her along insistently, guiding her down the hall to the niche. It was just as Sweetmeat had said it would be. Behind them, the lock on the wingdoor clacked and clattered. Daryk pushed her into the recesses of the alcove. He motioned to Devin and the big man led her to the back, where the passage was supposedly concealed. Daryk remained where he was.

Soft footsteps padded their way towards him. Daryk silently loosed his blade. Yes, it was the Dark Servant, Daryk had no doubt. He could *smell* him. He knew that it wasn't exactly a physical odor as much as a spiritual one. Daevlyn Temyr smelled of corruption and pestilence and hatred and death. His soul was rotting within him and the stench of that decay pungently assailed Daryk. He held his breath.

If I can smell him, Daryk thought. Does that mean that he can smell me too?

The footsteps were closer.

Closer.

And receding.

Then they stopped altogether. Daryk didn't hear the Dark Servant open the door to enter the room, but the sudden cessation of the fetid rankness informed him of the assassin's movement.

He fled.

About fifty feet down the tunnel he found Cassie and Devin

waiting for him. He urged them down the rest of the way. The tunnel terminated with a solid wall. After much poking and prodding, Devin found the lever and pulled. The wall swung away from them...

Revealing Elshander the dwarf, brandishing an axe with a head the size of a man's torso. Cassie's heart failed.

I knew it! she thought. *He betrayed us!*

She braced herself to run.

Elshander lowered his weapon.

"Sand and scars!" he exclaimed. "You nearly frightened me to death! Whew! Okay, this way."

He led them through the mist away from the inn. The rain had abated and a foggy drizzle now engulfed the area. That was good because it afforded them some cover for their escape; it was bad because it left the ground moist but not flooded--their footsteps easy to track. Dark shapes emerged from the mist in front of them. Tethered to a small post about a hundred feet from the *Green Drake* were three stout Vandoraean ponies.

"These are Sweetmeat's own, so be very nice to them. He has packed the bags lightly but you will probably need to stop for provisions in two or three days. I'd advise you to avoid the roads and definitely bypass the inns. Good luck."

"Thank you, my friend," Daryk squeezed his shoulder.

He grunted.

"Be well, Daryk Frost."

Cassie, her eyes brimming with tears, touched his arm. She felt guilty for having suspected him of any ill will.

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

He growled something about trying to gain them some time, then sprinted back in the direction of the inn.

"Well," Daryk said, turning to Devin. "I guess this is it."

"I guess so."

Daryk gave Devin a hand-drawn map and quickly offered instructions to him. Devin listened distractedly and Cassie worried that he would forget everything Daryk was telling him.

When they were done, each one shifted from foot to foot, stalling, not ready to depart.

"Take care of yourself," Daryk said.

"You too."

"And don't take any unnecessary risks."

"Too late."

They smiled.

"Yeah, I suppose so. Remember, don't touch the *Dauvendrake*. It's dangerous."

"I'll remember."

"I'm serious. The *King-blade* can eat your soul."

"I'll be careful."

They embraced.

"I love you, Dev," Daryk said. "Make sure you come back."

Devin disentangled himself from the *Greyman's* clasp and hugged Cassie. They mounted their ponies quickly, gazing tensely back at the *Green Drake Inn*.

"Ride pretty hard for at least a day. For all we know, Temyn might hunt you down merely out of spite. He'll see where we parted. Maybe that will buy us some time, maybe not. Anyway, we're not doing anything but wasting time here. Be well."

"Yeah. Take care of her," Devin said.

"I'll try."

"I'll be the one taking care of him," Cassie sniffed.

They laughed a little falsely.

"Walk with God, Daryk Frost."

"If he'll let me."

"Farewell."

They parted. Cassie looked back a few times, but the hills were full and the sun still below them. Fog and mist diffused the blue moon's light. She lost track of Devin after only a few moments. She glanced at Daryk and he kicked his pony into a faster pace. She followed closely but didn't ride beside him. She decided that he wanted to be left alone.

There had been tears on his cheeks.

TWENTY-SEVEN

There was a soft knock at Denna's door.

It was her servant, Marnie. The docile, gossamer-haired girl led her through the passageways of Whitehall to a waiting room near the Throne-room. Denna waited there.

The mission from Devlin had just arrived and Lleric had asked her to help him greet them. As much as she loathed the affairs of the state and detested people in general right now, she found herself accepting.

She needed to be surrounded by people now. To be insulated by them. Protected.

If it hadn't been for Lleric she probably would have gone mad. The last few days had been almost unbearable. But Lleric had been wonderful. He had really gone out of his way to help the children, too. Jenny had been reticent to accept his friendship at first but now viewed him with a kind of resigned lack of interest. Dodder, however, was a different story. He really didn't understand the concept of death and dying, but nevertheless had been in an unflinching black mood. He wanted absolutely nothing to do with Lleric.

Denna hoped that would change soon. Lleric had done them nothing but kindness and she hoped they could someday repay him. That was why she was here, she guessed. Even though the thought of having to greet an entire delegation of Tablelords made her feel a little ill, she was here. Because Lleric had asked her to. She had done quite a few things lately simply because he had requested them; she felt that she owed him.

Alone in the Throne-room's antechamber, Denna found that she was crying. She tried to stifle it, but the tears just kept coming. All her bottled up emotions were dripping inexorably out; she could abate the flow to a mere trickle but she couldn't staunch the effusion entirely.

"M'lady," a quiet voice murmured.

She looked up. Through her tear-stained eyes she saw a young man of about thirteen or fourteen. He was dressed in the royal colors but the clothes were ill-fitted for him. The garments seemed to droop from his limbs. Dark circles lined his eyes but his face was kind and broad. His sandy blonde hair was recently cut but tousled and unruly. His deep blue eyes were broody and keen. He held a silky handkerchief out to her.

She accepted it gratefully.

"I'm sorry. It's been...I did not mean--"

He hushed her and went over to a small chest. Producing a set

of keys from his purse, he opened the lid. After a moment, he returned. He had something in his hand.

"You are Denna, wife of Gregory?"

It really wasn't a question.

"How did you know?"

The young boy smiled.

"I know more than most people think."

He took her hand.

"M'lady, it grieves me to hear of your loss. I know that nothing I may say will grant the consolation I so dearly want to give, but I hope that I can aid you on your journey back to happiness."

Denna stared wonderingly at the boy. He spoke so formally for one so young.

"It is a custom here in Whitehall to present gifts of respect to the family of the lost ones. It would do me great honor if you would accept this small token of my esteem."

He held out his hand. Cradled in his open palm was a thin, ornate signet ring. It was a delicately crafted graefawn--a furry little dragon--curled around a tiny jewel. The graefawn's tail wrapped around the ring, encircling the wearer's finger. It was one of the finest things Denna had ever seen.

It was also the signet ring of the king himself. She doubted that the boy had the authority to give away such a treasure.

But she didn't want to insult him. Besides, Lleric could return it for her later, if needed.

"Thank you," she said as he placed it on her finger.

"Thank you, m'lady. I hope to see your children soon."

Denna smiled. He was a little old for them to play with, but he seemed to be a very kind-hearted boy. She was genuinely touched by his concern.

"I see you are wearing the livery of the royal house," she noted. "Are you one of the king's servants? You must be. Did he give you--I mean, to have such responsibility at such a young age--"

He was looking at her peculiarly.

"Ah, yes," he sighed. "You haven't been here long, have you, m'lady?"

He stood and began to retreat slowly.

"I am not a servant to the king," he said. "I am the king."

"The king?"

"Well, truthfully, no. Not yet. Perhaps never. But I am the prince, Anthony Erindale. I shall never ascend the throne unless the Paladin returns to the Circle Lands. I do not expect that to happen."

Denna cursed herself inwardly. In her grief, she had not been thinking.

"The ring was my mother's. She died shortly after my father. Please keep it. If you should ever need anything, send word to me. If I am able, I will help you."

He turned to go.

"M'lord."

He stopped.
"Why give me such a precious gift?"
He did not turn around.
"You remind me of her."
Then he was gone.

TWENTY-EIGHT

After parting company with Daryk and Princess Cassandra at the *Green Drake* in Middleton, Devin followed the trade route directly south toward Damask. Yet instead of turning east to go to the small rural village, he ventured west across the hill country, making good time for Tolliver. He looked at the map often, even though he didn't need it. He just could not believe what he was doing, where he was going. The only way for him to push back the insanity of the whole thing was to try to forget it and concentrate on his present predicament. After the first day out, he knew without doubt that he was being followed. Daryk had been right about the Dark Servant following him--either out of spite or by mistake--and Devin could sense that Temyn was closing. He hoped to lose him in Tolliver.

Never pausing for more than a few minutes, Devin pushed his little pony as hard as she would go. The noble creature far exceeded his greatest expectations for her. Staid but stalwart, she trudged onward toward Tolliver. Devin even thought it was by sheer will that the diminutive Vandoraean managed to delay pulling up lame until they were less than a mile out of Tolliver.

Tolliver was not an enclosed city, so it was some time after he had entered the city that Devin actually reached the city proper. He wasted no time, seeking out a horse-milliner he knew well and conducting his business quickly.

"Now, Epios," he told the merchant. "I am trusting you to provide the finest care for this little pony. It is one of the bravest animals I have ever encountered."

"Braver than Thunderbird?"

"Now, you know I'm partial."

"So why are you riding this one?" The milliner laughed. "Especially considering the fact that you probably weigh twice as much as it does."

Devin's face clouded. He didn't want to think about his old mount. It made him depressed. Thunderbird had been his favorite mount from the first time he rode her.

"It's a long story."

"You finally rode her into some ditch, didn't you? I knew you would do it sooner or later, how carelessly you ride. I swear, that horse had to have been the best ever crafted by Aan to have survived as long as it did."

"I didn't ride her into a ditch."

"Oh? Sold her then?"

"I don't want to discuss it," Devin said obstinately. "What

I do want to discuss is where I might find an honest horsetrader."

"Perhaps in the Homeland. But as far as Traders go, Eric Thonius is trustworthy--once you look past his peculiarities. You will find him next to the *Boar's Head Tavern*."

Devin placed a bag of Hall coins on Epios' counter.

"That is for the pony's care." He removed a shimmering green bridle and mantle from a shelf. "And for these."

"I don't know how many times I've told you, m'lord, you have to take better care of what's under the trappings. A dead horse is a dead horse no matter how good it looks."

Devin slid another coin beside the bag on the counter.

"Make sure she gets back to Sweetmeat in the best condition possible. I will check on it."

"Of course."

Just as Epios had said, Devin found Thonius to be an ethical dealer. The peculiarities he had mentioned turned out to be the Trader's feet. Whether deformed from birth or perhaps crushed by some unruly horse, Devin could not tell; his feet were splayed too widely and were lumpy and gnarled. The man had overcome the trials of walking by attaching a small cart which he stood on to one or more horses.

Thonius helped Devin find a broad, robust charger that would fulfill his needs of strength, swiftness and endurance. It was a smooth cream and he couldn't help but think of how lovely the stallion would look with the green bridle and mantle. After a few moments haggling over the price, Devin paid Eric Thonius a reasonable amount and prepared the horse for travel.

"What is his name?" Devin asked as he swung up into the saddle.

"Galathe."

"Galathe." Devin stuck out his lower lip. "I like it!"

He bought provisions for several weeks and left Tolliver from the west side, headed for the Circle Land's southern reaches. He had spent no more than an hour in the city. He hoped to gain a couple of days on Temyn because of his excursion through the city. If Devin were lucky, the assassin would search for him in Tolliver for a few days--perhaps even lose the trail entirely.

If Devin were unlucky, Temyn was following him now.

* * * * *

Daevlyn Temyn crushed the map in his gloved fist. It had belonged to the Fanyddian. The big man had entered Tolliver less than an hour ago. If only he had wasted less time dealing with the dwarf.

But that had been worth it.

Elshander the dwarf had screamed like a girl when Temyn had killed him. But then again, so did everyone. The diminutive dwarf had been uncommonly loyal, though. Nothing the Dark Servant could do could draw anything from the stout warrior.

That had been a disappointment.

But he relished the little dwarf's screams.

If he could have collected the wails in a cup to drink, he would have had the sweetest draught in all of Myland. He would have been drunk on the messenger's sorrow.

Sadness and fear! Ah, what better to slake the thirst?

Soon, very soon, the Grey Prince's aide would feel the same suffering that the Dwarf experience. And it would be nice! He actually began to salivate in anticipation. The aide would probably try to lose the pursuit of Temyn within the city proper. That was no problem.

The Dark Servant knew where he was headed.

He was going after the King-blade.

Daevlyn Temyn saw this in a dream. Silvertongue, faithful as always, had given him the answer. The Shadowking did not know where the weapon was, but he assured Temyn that the human fool would lead him right to the sword.

Tymelayn was somewhere in the wilderland, he knew that much. Temyn planned on bypassing the town of Tolliver and simply waiting for the aide on the other side. Once in the dangerous lands of the west, the man would be his.

He urged his midnight mount on slowly. He was in no hurry. The killing would come soon enough.

TWENTY-NINE

Whitehall.

The Spired City. The Castle of Light. Now that Caerlydd had been destroyed, it was rumored to be the most magnificent city in the world.

Cassie believed it.

She had never been to the city before, although her father had been there often. He had never allowed her to accompany him to the land's center and truthfully, she hadn't minded. Of course, she had been young and ignorant then.

Whitehall was magnificent.

Its turrets stretched majestically upwards, aspiring for heaven. The castle was recessed into the lake itself, its ramparts appearing from the waters like the shield of an emerging water deity. Cassie could see the glittering men on the parapets peeking through merlons; slitted visors within the embrasures. The battlements of the imposing city seemed impregnable yet the ramparts were still quite aesthetically pleasing: the slim turrets and barbettes flowed gracefully upwards, the bulwarks wide and smooth. As they neared the sparkling wonder, Cassie noted with some foreboding and trepidation that the approach to Whitehall was easily watched. No one could get near the castle without being easily spotted. She wondered if an escape route that provided more cover might be found.

Frost led her up to the barbican without even the slightest hesitation. They blended in with the herd of people pouring into the market area outside the inner ward. They passed beneath the raised portcullis without even having to confront the guardsmen.

The instant Cassie passed through the gatehouse into the outer ward, she felt as if she had sailed off the edge of the world. She stepped from the banks of the barbican into the steady flow of the marketplace. She was engulfed. Splashes of color swam before her, impossibly vibrant and bright. Waves of people foamed past, pulling her along with the tide. Ships of commerce beckoned to her, anchored amidst the tumult. She was drowning in the experience.

The Greyman took her hand.

From the compassion that shone in his eyes, she knew how much fear must have shown in hers. He squeezed her hand reassuringly and pulled her close before him, protecting and guiding her simultaneously. Her hair was bound beneath Daryk's doublet, her ample breasts concealed beneath a light cloak. He murmured softly against her cheek.

"First thing we need to do, is to find us a place to stay. Hopefully there will be lodgings here that are inconspicuous and well-placed. Wait here while I take care of the horses."

She grabbed his shirt.

"You don't know of a place?"

"Cassie, I'm not very well-liked here."

She nodded. He left her in a small, recessed alcove behind a jewelry vendor from Waterford. Without Frost's body pressed firmly behind her, Cassie felt exposed and vulnerable. She ducked back into the niche, peering out from beneath the linked mail that crowned her head with wary eyes. People pushed by in every mode of dress imaginable: deep earth tones, bright Vandoraean garb, artisan pastels, flowing robes, short tunics, coarse *camas*, silky *erins*. Cassie could barely take it all in. She could hear at least five different languages being shouted across the marketplace and innumerable dialects answering back.

Yet this kaleidoscope of sight and sound was not what Cassie noticed most, not what she liked most about the market at Whitehall, not what she would remember for the rest of her life. What struck her most vividly was the smell.

Perfumes, smoke, food, sweat, incense and exotic heated drinks blended into a sweet, wonderful smell. Cassie gulped in the collage of scents, swallowing mouthful after mouthful of rich, flavorful air. A little sadly, she realized that she was becoming accustomed to the smell; the fine distinctions blending in together and losing their autonomy. Finally, her olfactory taste buds were sated.

She looked over to where Daryk had disappeared to but saw no sign of him. She wished he would hurry. Before her, the wide back of the Vandoraean peddler danced and moved as he called out to the people of the marketplace to come view his wares.

Cassie glanced down at his goods and a small trinket caught her eye. It was a pendant on a long gold chain. A little girl had been crafted out of fine leaf gold within a tiny bubble of glass. Tiny white flakes floated within the little globe, providing the scene with the illusion of snow. The gold-leaf girl's arms were outstretched upwards, reaching for the flakes. The whole thing was about the size of Cassie's thumbnail, but it drew her attention away from the larger, gaudier pieces of jewelry.

When she had been younger, it snowed in Warynn only once. It was the only winter she and Susanna had spent together. The spring following, Cassie had bought a snow-bauble for Susanna. It was larger and less finely made than the necklace, yet the likeness was disturbing. Cassie realized then that she had no remembrances of her best friend--that all physical reminders of her friend she buried with Susanna, long ago.

The merchant, noticing her intense interest, picked up the necklace and dangled it temptingly before her.

"Have you some wish for this, young page? For a beautiful maiden, yes? Perhaps your master will buy it for you?"

"Not today," Daryk's voice answered.

She felt the pull of his hand at her elbow and reluctantly

left the necklace and her memories behind. He guided her through the throng towards the entrance to the inner ward.

"I've taken care of the mounts," he said. "But citizens are no longer allowed to stay out here overnight. We'll have to find somewhere to stay within the inner ward."

The passageway into the heart of Whitehall was long and narrow. The way was lined with murderholes for archers to use to cut down an invading army. In the history of Whitehall, they had never been necessary. Cassie and Daryk passed through two sets of iron-bound gates and into a wide, contained area called *the bowl*. There was only one exit out of the bowl and it was so small that everyone who went through had to proceed single-file past the guards. As they reached the small doorway, Daryk presented some official-looking documents to the guards. They gave them only a cursory glance and waved the two on. Cassie didn't ask him where he got the papers.

When they were out of earshot of the guards, Daryk told her, "It's been a few years since I was last here. A number of things have changed, but I believe there is a place we can stay just beyond the practice rings. It is possible that I may be recognized there--at the rings--but we have to go ahead and try to get by. I can think of no other place that will take us."

"Practice rings?"

"Yes. It's where young men are taught the basics of weaponry and tactics. The older warriors also spend their time there honing their skills. Although I doubt there will be many there today. The people of Whitehall have grown fat and soft. Few people still train, thinking that war is no longer a part of life. I fear they will learn differently before too long."

"Do you really think Silvertongue can affect the peoples this far south?"

Daryk's face grew dark.

"In my dream, he has been planning to do battle with the land. I believe that unless we can find some way to stop him, his armies will march straight through the Circle Lands, pausing only to enslave our children and rape our wives."

"But we turned his army before, didn't we?"

"We?"

Cassie blushed. Armies from the Circle Lands had never defeated the Nortman armies.

"The dwarvish and Haven army destroyed a force from the north. But I have come to believe more and more through the years that that army was only a small fraction of Silvertongue's actual strength. Besides, he will have a different strategy this time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, last time, I think he was just feeling us out. Discovering our strengths, uncovering our weaknesses. This time, I think he will be coming with no reservations. And he will have more than just warriors in his army."

"Bogeys?"

"And Daemons, and who knows what else."

"Do you think we can beat him?"

"Not if he gets the swords."

"Llerand Lley's Four Blades."

"Correct. The four that are supposed to be wielded by the Dragonriders at the end of time. They are supposed to be very powerful singly, invincible together."

"You think Silvertongue is going after the Four?"

"It makes sense. Temyn already has two of the them. I know where the King-blade is--and if I do, you can be assured Silvertongue does. So that only leaves the Pendelayn, the Princess-sword."

"And do you know where it is?"

"No," Daryk stuck out his tongue thoughtfully. "I only know what legend tells me."

"Which is?"

"That it was placed in the hand of the High King ages ago."

"You mean it is here in Whitehall?"

"I mean it was here in Whitehall. I haven't the first guess as to where it is now."

"When was that?"

"I'm not sure. The allusion is in one of Ballad's epics, a lesser known one called the *Myannislaysn*."

"The sword departs?"

Daryk nodded, "*The Departure of the Blades*. It told the history of all the Swords. According to the song, all the swords came to rest in the hands of kings: *Tymelayn*, the King-blade ended in the embrace of Haelvin Thunderhammer, the great dwarf-king; *Tarilaysn*, the Queen-sword was supposed to have fallen into the hands of the king of Daevalege; *Ithylain* reportedly returned to Daeron with the Paladin-king of that land; and *Pendelayn*, the Princess-sword was supposed to have been placed in the hand of King David here in Whitehall ages ago."

"But that's backwards," Cassie protested. "The King-blade was wielded by David against Silvertongue. Gurggi the man-beast hid it somewhere. *Pendelayn* was never held by the High King. That's wrong!"

Daryk shook his head and shrugged, reciting,

"*Pendelayn, the Destined Sword,
The lowest Blade of all
Found her rest in the High King's hand
In the land of the great White Hall.*"

Cassie sighed.

"Can there be another 'White Hall'?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Great." Cassie pursed her lips. "So the Queen-sword was stolen from the Daevalege king by Temyn."

"Or given to him. After all Daevalege, the evil heart or dark heart has been under the rule of the Spoiler for nearly two hundred years. They worship him as the only god. Anything Silvertongue wishes, they will grant because they believe he talks to the Adversary himself. If Daevlyn Temyn, Silvertongue's agent, asked

for the sword, they would fall all over themselves trying to give it to him."

"Okay. So they gave Teyn the sword and he now has *Ithylain*, the Paladin's blade."

"Yes."

"Oh, how convenient! Why couldn't the Paladin have just stayed where he was and kept the Queen-sword out of his reach?"

"He thought he was needed here."

"Well, he didn't help much!"

"He helped me."

For the softness of his voice, Cassie could tell that she had hurt the Greyman's feelings. She shut up.

They walked in silence for awhile, taking turn after turn without a word. Finally they reached a large open area near the royal castle. Except around the outskirts, the ground was worn and well-trodden, bereft of grass and shrubbery.

"The barracks are over there." Daryk pointed to a squat, dirty building behind the training fields. "We will stay there tonight. By tomorrow night, I should hope to have us a place more private. Until then, I'm afraid you'll have to stay disguised as you are."

Cassie looked at the old building with distaste. It wasn't much to her liking. It was small, dirty, ugly. She couldn't tell from this distance, but she thought it probably had only a common room for all the occupants to share. So much for privacy.

In the practice ring in front of the barracks there was a large gathering of people--probably fifty or sixty watching matches in three small yards. Cassie pointed in their direction.

"Looks like you were wrong about no one being out practicing," she observed. "It looks like a tourney."

"Hardly," Daryk said. "You forget, Cassie, things are much larger here in Whitehall. The people here are social monsters. Half the populace shows up for their games. This barely constitutes a skirmish."

"Then what are so many people doing out."

"I suppose we are about to find out. Maybe they have finally gotten off their butts and are beginning to relearn the art of war."

"Do you think so?"

"No. Just be quiet and try not to say anything," Daryk said as they approached the group. "And remember: try to remain inconspicuous."

As they neared the gathering of people, it became obvious that the crowd had assembled casually. Most were watching the combatants with only mild interest, talking amidst themselves discourteously.

Daryk mounted the steps to the risers in order to observe the action below. He saw that there were three bouts occurring simultaneously. Two of the practices were between seasoned men trying to keep a little bit of an edge on their younger brethren. These bouts were slow and languid, with numerous breaks. The other practice ring was occupied by what seemed to be a knight and his

page. The young man was strong and full of energy, but he was wild. It didn't seem to Daryk that he was learning much.

Cassie gripped his arm tightly.

"What?"

She pointed.

"Over there," she whispered. "By the water basin."

Daryk looked to where she was gesturing. A nobleman stood there watching the matches with interest. He was dressed in a deep green tunic that fell below his waist. His pants were teal, his boots black. He wore some insignia of office around his neck, but Daryk couldn't discern what it was. His hair was curly, his beard neatly trimmed. His dark eyes were thoughtful and open. To Daryk, he seemed harmless enough.

"Him?" Daryk motioned. "So what?"

"That's Lord Colwyn Michael, Commander of the Guard. I'm kind of supposed to marry him."

"What!?" Daryk said, a little too loudly.

"Sssh!"

"What do you mean--you're kind of supposed to marry him?"

"Well, it's complicated."

"Go on."

"Quiet!" she whispered fiercely. "He hadn't officially asked yet, but he breached the subject with me the last time we were together. When he brought me the book."

"What did you say?"

"I told him I'd think about it."

"Oh." The Greyman's voice was husky.

"Well he didn't have to ask me at all! He could have just asked my father and *whisk!* off I would have gone."

Daryk stood staring at him a little longer.

"No matter," he said finally. "Just be sure to keep your back to him and--"

"Lord Michael!"

Daryk wheeled around.

"Lord Michael!"

It was the page calling.

"M'lord, would you care to go a bout. Lord Rosencransse has lost his sword arm somewhere."

"My liege, you know that there is nothing I would enjoy more." Michael's voice was soft and genuine, hardly the voice of a guard's commander. "But I am forbad by law, you know that."

"But, sir--"

"I shall take you, young liege!" shouted an effete dandy.

"But you must promise to take it easy on me."

"Lord Michael--" the young man protested.

"You know the proscription, my prince. Besides, Gidden has already volunteered. Do not insult him by refusing."

"But--"

Colwyn Michael raised his eyebrows.

"All right!" the prince conceded unhappily. "Let's see what you can do, my good Lord Steryn."

"My prince!" The young man turned back to Colwyn Michael.

"Keep your movements controlled. You are swinging wide every time. Draw your opponent."

The boy grinned.

"Thanks."

Daryk turned away from the bout.

"My prince!" he murmured. "By Aan, that's it! That's it!"

"That's what?" Cassie asked.

"Prince Anthony Erindale. Pretender to the Throne. I understand that there have been several attempts on his life lately! That's it!"

"I don't understand."

"Assassins, Cassie. Assassins."

"So? He's a prince. Princes should expect assassins."

"Not when there's no chance that he will ascend the Throne."

"Maybe someone is just trying to be sure."

"With the Paladin dead? Why bother?"

"Maybe the people who are trying to assassinate him haven't heard about your dream yet."

He frowned at her sarcasm.

"He's the reason I'm here."

"Did you dream that?"

"No."

"Then how can you be sure? What if you're wrong?"

"I'm not."

"But what if you are?"

"I'm not! Now be quiet!"

He turned back to watch the practice.

"Oh sure," Cassie said, mimicking him. "Be quiet. Don't draw attention to yourself. Great. I'm not the one getting defensive and yelling so that everyone turns around. Be quiet! *Hurmph!*"

The young prince was circling the old lord warily, looking for an opening. Daryk guessed from the easy way that the overweight warrior held his sword that he was a better fighter than he was a dresser.

He was right.

The obese nobleman turned the prince's rash attack effortlessly, using his weight and superior skill to turn the prince's blade wider and wider. Any second now he would strike and score against the wildly flailing young man.

Now!

Now!

Now!

Daryk's brow knit.

Why wasn't the old swordsman finishing him? Opportunity after opportunity passed by and still he would not strike. Daryk glanced up at the other bystanders. Except for Lord Michael, they were all absorbed in their own conversations. Then Daryk understood. It wasn't disrespect at all; they were ignoring the fight below out of courtesy to the old man.

"Keep your swordarm in, m'lord," Lord Michael called. "You are out of control."

The young prince pulled in immediately, tightening his guard.

He parried a weak attack by his adversary and, although his riposte was slow, he caught his opponent square in the middle of his distended belly.

"Good hit, my liege!" the dandy cried.

The gallery clapped politely.

"Damned sycophants!" Daryk muttered.

"My prince, that thrust was impeccable! Very quick!"

"Impeccable?" Daryk yelled. "Nearly impossible to miss, I'd say, given the target."

Cassie's eyes popped wide. She glanced around furtively. Utter silence. Everyone was staring in their direction.

"My page could have blocked that thrust," Daryk yelled again, although he could have whispered and been heard. "And he fights like a girl."

A low grumble ran through the crowd.

Cassie covered her eyes with one hand.

"You call this being inconspicuous?"

"Sssh! I know what I'm doing."

"Oh, that's obvious!"

"My young page!" Daryk shouted again. "If you wish to duel with someone more to your level, I will gladly lend you my aide here, unskilled though he is."

He gestured to Cassie.

"I really think this is a mistake," she whimpered.

Lord Steryn was bristling with anger.

"Let me teach this insolent fool a lesson, my liege!"

"My liege?" Daryk sounded surprised. "Well then, I suppose I'll have to take you myself. It wouldn't do for the royal brat to have his bottom whipped by a mere page, now would it?"

"You will pay for such impertinence!" Steryn fumed.

"Oh please, m'lord." Daryk bowed magnanimously, "I beg your pardon. I'd hate to have to join in combat with a warrior the likes of you."

The dandy was placated a little by this.

"After all, you might trip and crush me to death!"

"Why, of all the--"

"Enough!" Through all of Daryk's insults, the young prince merely listened. An amused smile played on his lips now. "All right sir, your challenge is accepted."

"But m'lord--"

"He insulted me, Gidden. I shall face him."

He motioned for Daryk to enter into the ring. Daryk nodded and sketched a bow. He vaulted over the railing and landed firmly on the sandy dirt below.

Lord Steryn, unsatisfied, raised his blade as if to slap Daryk with it. He was stopped by the Greyman's witchblade suddenly appearing beneath his throat.

"Just leaving," the fop squeaked.

Colwyn Michael, alarmed by Daryk's speed, warned, "My liege, I would advise you not to continue with this."

Prince Anthony was tightening the brace around his wrist.

"Lord Michael," he said. "You were not asked."

Daryk made a surprised face at this.

"Cocky little bastard," he commented to Cassie, who had climbed down into the circle with him.

"Yes," she agreed. "You are."

He stuck his tongue out at her.

"I know what I'm doing."

"Please, m'lord--is this really necessary?"

"Probably not," he said with a grin. "But it's effective."

He handed her his scabbard and belt and moved to a nearby barrel to pick out a mock-blade to spar with. He found one with a weight he liked and called out, "Ready!"

"My friend," Anthony scoffed, gesturing towards a nearby table. "There are braces and guards over there. Pray, don you the protection allowed. I may actually score a hit!"

"My lord, I shall have no more need of protection from you than a wolf from a kitten."

The young man's face grew hard.

"As you wish."

Daryk smiled confidently.

They approached slowly, circling. The prince's anger barely held in check. Cassie didn't blame him for being nonplussed and irritated by the Greyman, Daryk was acting infuriatingly rude.

"Join!" the prince called.

Anthony took a step closer and brought his blade high. He obviously wished to teach this buffoon a lesson quickly. The arcing stroke descended not so much in a move to score as in a move to hurt. Daryk had more than enough time to block the swing, but the force of it jarred his arm appreciably. Frost was amazed at the boy's strength. His swordarm was easily as powerful as some of the greatest warriors alive--Daryk included.

"Are you certain you don't want to be wearing some protection now, m'lor--uungh!"

In one fluid motion, Daryk lunged and thrust viciously, planting the boy on his butt. Dazed, Anthony pulled himself to his feet. There were cries of protest from the gallery.

"You were saying, m'lord?"

Anthony glowered at him.

"Rule number one, my prince: brute strength is a poor match for true skill."

"Join!" Anthony yelled, raising his blade threateningly.

Lightning-quick, Daryk thrust and hit him firmly on the forehead. A red welt immediately appeared.

"Rule number two: never fight until you are ready."

Rubbing his forehead morosely, the young prince lowered into a fighting stance. His blue eyes glittered dangerously.

"Join."

Uh-oh! Daryk thought. Anthony had reined in his emotions impressively. It was going to be much more difficult now. No more surprises would catch him. Daryk circled him tensely, trying to appear casual and unconcerned. He would have to use everything he had. It was important not only to beat the young prince, but also to make it look effortless. He wasn't sure he could do that.

Daryk thrust sharply. The prince parried.

The Greyman sent a flurry of blows down upon him. Anthony scurried backwards, slapping at Daryk's blade.

"Good," Daryk said.

You could see the prince's smile turn upwards at the approval. Pitiful. Daryk stuck him in the chest--hard. It would bruise tomorrow.

"Rule number three: never relax until it's over."

Shaking his head with an inward reproach, Anthony dropped into a crouch again.

"Join."

Daryk fainted a few times. The prince was unmoved.

Okay, Daryk thought, and lunged suddenly.

The prince was unable to get out of the way but he forced Daryk's blade aside. Eager for the easy hit, Daryk had overextended--something he would never do in a real melee--and Anthony's riposte passed dangerously close to his chest. In a blur, Daryk went for the cheap hit, to give the boy the impression that he had drawn the prince rather than been taken by him. There was a hollow *spak!* as Daryk's mock-blade struck the boy's knuckles. Anthony yelped and dropped his sword. His eyes teared and he clutched his hand to his chest. Cassie buried her head in her hands. There were hisses from the onlookers.

"Poor hit! Poor hit!"

"Bastard! Who does he think he--"

"Where did he learn to cross?"

"Ungentlemanly, that was! He never--"

Prince Anthony looked up at Daryk with hurt, boyish eyes. Yet there was a resignation there too, as if he had felt far crueler blows in his young life and had come to expect them.

"I...I had the right of way," he said. "It was my thrust. You should have--"

"I should have what?" Daryk interrupted brusquely. "Let you hit me? When you struck so slowly? I think not!"

"But...but you hit my hand. That was--" he searched for the word he wanted. Not finding it, he settled with, "Unfair."

"Unfair?" Daryk laughed brutally. "Do you think a Bogey will fight fair? Do you know of any fair Nortmen. For that matter, Are any of these men fair?" He gestured expansively. "Would they desist from slaying you because you have a boo-boo on your little finger?"

"Rule number--what?--four: sword-fighting is all about death; you wield a blade in order to kill someone. Remember this! There is nothing fair about death!"

At Daryk's mention of Nortmen and Bogeys, Colwyn Michael approached the railing of the ring urgently. When he spoke, his voice had a quiet insistence.

"My liege, get out of there, now!"

"I'm all right, Lord Michael."

"But my prince, this man is--"

"I'm all right, I said! We will finish the match."

He picked up his sword.

"But m'lord--"

"No! I'll not hear it! We will finish!"

He turned to Daryk, his voice low enough that only they two could hear.

"Have you fought the Bogeys?"

"Yes."

"How old were you?" the prince asked disbelievingly.

"Very young the first time, very old the second."

"Have you slain any Circlemen?"

"A few."

"Have you killed any Nortmen?"

"Hundreds."

"Will you kill me?"

"Perhaps."

The young man smiled ambiguously.

"Continue the lesson then. Join!"

Daryk lowered his blade and advanced. Anthony had admirably corrected his habit of swinging wild. His motions were quick, sparse, ascetic. Daryk was hard pressed to push back his defense. His attacks, though strong, still lacked refinement, but his parries were beginning to look excellent. The boy was a quick learner. Daryk guided the prince's blade down with a flick and snuck inside. Seeing he was beaten, the boy instantly swatted at the mock-blade with his empty hand.

Oooh! Bad habit. We've got to stop that.

They circled for a few minutes longer, until Prince Anthony's breath was short and ragged. Daryk felt that he had a good grasp on the boy's strengths and weaknesses. He ran his blade down the length of Anthony's and gave his wrist a flick.

The mock-blade was wrenched from the prince's grasp.

He sighed and turned to retrieve the weapon. Daryk followed, touching him lightly with his own sword's point. The prince kept walking, intent on showing no reaction.

"Point, point, point, point, point, point, point," Daryk half-sung as he jabbed the boy's back. "Oh, this is boring! Don't you agree, my prince? Me jabbing you with this terrible blunt thing, you getting knocked on the head over and over and over again." He accented his words with inciteful little pokes. "Hardly very realistic at all, wouldn't you agree?"

The prince slapped the blade away with his hand and turned. There was fire in his eyes.

"What would you suggest?" he seethed.

Daryk's expression was flippant but his tone was flat.

"First cut."

Anthony's eyes narrowed but his gaze was steady.

"No!"

"My liege--"

"This has gone far enough!"

"If he thinks for one second--"

The cries of the sycophants changed his evaluation of them slightly. He understood their situation a bit more clearly. Their outcries were backed by genuine concern; of course, Daryk didn't

believe for an instant that their protestations were founded on anything more than self-interest and -preservation, but he no longer loathed them so. They were scared old men who had grown accustomed to the comfortable life of a nobleman. Within the magocracy that Whitehall had become, they had lost their identity; and they had only a young, unlearned prince to help them find it again.

He thought all this in an instant. His eyes did not waver from Anthony's. The prince nodded almost imperceptibly.

"First cut."

Roars of outrage.

Daryk went to retrieve his blade, Anthony his. Cassie regarded the Greyman with wide, unbelieving eyes.

"Daryk," she was scared, he could hear it. Sand and scars, so was he. "When you said you were here because of the prince, I thought you meant to protect him--not to kill him."

"I'm not going to kill him, Cassie," Daryk said exasperatedly. "But I have to frighten him. If he feels safe, he'll never take me on. I've got to make him feel vulnerable; like he needs me."

"What if one of you gets hurt?"

"We won't. I'm better than that."

"But what if there's an accident."

"Stop worrying," he said uneasily.

She scrunched up her face anxiously.

"Daryk, I didn't like what you were doing in there. Please, have some pity. He may be big, but he's very young."

"There's no room for pity. If I don't teach him, he's going to die." Daryk's voice was oddly gruff. He hadn't liked himself when he had been goading the boy very much either. But he felt a little sick about himself for another reason. He had liked torturing and humiliating the young prince. A bitter taste rose in his mouth when he thought of it.

"There have been attempts on his life," Cassie said quietly. "Look at the rings around his eyes. I think he knows how serious this is."

Daryk only grunted.

He slid his witchblade from its sheath and returned to the center of the ring. Anthony was alone in a corner, preparing mentally. Daryk noticed for the first time that the prince had no servants at his side. He carried his own equipment and maintained his own weapons. Daryk approved.

Too bad he'll never be king, he thought. *He probably would have made a good one.*

Anthony touched his forehead to this sword's crosspiece--Daryk realized that he had been praying--and strode toward the Greyman.

"My lord," Colwyn Michael tried again. "I entreat you--"

"Later," Anthony said. "Entreat me later."

Lord Michael frowned deeply and disappeared from the ring's edge. The prince barely saw him go. With a mirthless smile, he lifted his steel.

"Join."

Daryk took a step back. He was going to have to be a little

more careful now. He couldn't just poke and prod with impunity now. One scratch just a bit too deep and he would have a dead boy on his hands.

But at last the prince understood the gravity of the duel. He no longer made wild strokes or foolhardy lunges; he no longer swatted at the blade with his hand; he no longer let his concentration stray; he no longer played.

Anthony's attacks were controlled and quick, his parries solid and effective. His point still ventured a little wide on an outside turn, but he was keeping remarkably tight. He didn't shy away from the Talisman's blows as Daryk first expected him to, but rather met them strongly and answered with fierce counterattacks. Daryk's objective had been met (perhaps too well): the prince was able to experience the almost-reality of true swordplay without too much risk of serious injury. Instead of rash charges, the prince composed a carefully played assault. To Daryk's surprise, Anthony even took the offensive a couple of times. His movements didn't have the smooth, flowing continuity of an experienced warrior's, but he had conquered all the basics. Daryk had a suspicion that the boy had been practicing outside the practice rings as well. There were several opportunities for Daryk to press to a cut, but the Greyman held back. He was sure that the prince had noted this, although he gave no sign.

Daryk grimaced, observing the youth's technical competence. Time to teach him some things you don't learn in the rings.

He began to circle purposefully, trying to put the sun in the prince's eyes. Anthony recognized the ploy instantly and maneuvered out of danger.

Good! Daryk thought.

Yet in the boy's escape, he had not been careful enough about his footing. The ring had a particularly bumpy area directly behind Anthony now. Daryk feinted and charged. Retreating, Anthony stumbled over the uneven ground and fell. He rolled to his feet only to meet the flat of Daryk's witchblade full on the temple. He staggered back a few steps, surprised more than hurt.

"If this were a real battle, m'lord, you would now be in search of a new neck adornment." Daryk said quietly. "Here. You are cut. It is over."

Prince Anthony touched his brow. His fingers came away crimson. Daryk bowed.

"No," the boy said firmly. "Incidental."

"My lord--" Daryk shook his head. This was getting out of hand. He felt tired. He still hadn't fully recovered all his strength from his sleeping dance with death.

"Join," Anthony said stubbornly.

Daryk sighed and raised his blade. It was time to end it.

With a cry, Anthony swung across the front of Daryk's chest. The Greyman lithely stepped back from the slicing metal. The front of his tunic ripped as the sword passed. Then, quick as a cat, he leapt forward and trapped the boy's returning swordarm beneath his armpit. He kicked Anthony viciously in the groin and smashed the pommel of his witchblade into the prince's stomach. The air rushed

out of the boy's body. Daryk dropped his blade and popped the prince in the nose. He grabbed the boy's finely made collar and pulled his face close.

"What do you think this is, pup? A game?" Daryk's growled. "Are you so eager to die?"

Anthony only gasped in reply.

"You fight to kill, remember? My next cut might not be so incidental, did you ever think of that? Why wield a blade at all if it can be avoided? You are going to get yourself killed if you don't learn right now that this is for real!"

"I know it's for real," Anthony spat back between his sobbing breaths. "And I am going to get killed no matter what."

Daryk was taken aback.

"Not if I can help it," he promised. "Let me assist you. Let me be your aide, your teacher. You need me."

It came out in a rush. Too urgent. Too insistent. He could feel his cool, collected demeanor melting away. The prince no doubt saw him as some kind of charlatan now; a man much more in need of Anthony than he in him. Anthony turned on him with an expression of mixed need, hopefulness and disgust. Daryk's eyes dropped. He had lost him.

"I don't need a hired blade." He pointed to the onlookers. "I have hundreds of them."

"Anthony--" Daryk felt a sick desperation in his stomach. He was losing his control on the boy. He had failed.

He tapped the prince's head.

"Here is your course," he said.

He tapped the prince's sword.

"Here is your recourse."

Anthony met his gaze.

"I would like to teach you how to wield both," he told the boy. "The sword is weaker than the sense. Please, let me instruct you."

Anthony threw him back. Once again, Daryk was impressed by the boy's strength.

"This lesson is not complete," the prince said with a broken voice. "Join--till a cut!"

Daryk lowered his head. He knew he could win the bout. But he had been defeated.

Anthony approached, sword ready. The Greyman met his attack and returned with a ferocious counter. Anthony parried every thrust. Daryk gave him everything he had; for almost thirty seconds, the prince held on doggedly. Then he fell, his weapon knocked from his hand. Daryk planted his foot on the youth's chest and raised his witchblade.

"Enough, Daryk Frost!"

The Greyman froze.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Lord Colwyn Michael. The Commander of the Guard had an arrow trained at the Talisman's heart.

"That is enough," he repeated.

"No!" Anthony cried from beneath him. "Till a cut!"

"My liege, there is hardly need--"

"That was the agreement!" the prince yelled. "Till a cut!"

Colwyn paused, unsure.

He addressed Daryk, "M'lord, if you so much as twitch, you will be wearing this shaft and feather."

"No! Do not touch him! Anyone who harms this man will be personally flayed by me!"

"With respect, my liege," Lord Michael's voice was hurt. "You cannot flay me if you are dead."

"Cut," the boy said.

"My prince, you fought valiantly," Daryk murmured. "We can end it--"

"Cut!"

Everyone was utterly silent. There was a hollow *thunk!* as Lord Michael dropped his arrow back into its quiver. Every eye was on Daryk's witchblade. It wavered a moment, then struck, blindingly fast.

Cassie screamed.

The prince cried out.

Silence.

Then, "You are a thick-headed fool, you little brat! There was no need to keep it going! In my entire life, I've never met anyone so stupidly obstinate!"

The prince got up without the aid of the Greyman. Blood poured from the gash on his cheek. He arose proudly though, withstanding the Talisman's barrage of insults with a set jaw.

"Cease!" he commanded, quieting Daryk's tirade. He approached the Greyman. This time it was his turn to grab Daryk's collar. "I am the prince. I may not be much of one, but you do not talk to me that way."

"That was moronic," Daryk fumed. "There was no reason for it. You could have been killed. I didn't need it. They certainly didn't need it--"

"I needed it!" Anthony answered. "I am not a fool, m'lord. But I am not a man yet either. However, I am the prince. Princes are supposed to have irrational whims. I have had none; take this as my first."

He released Daryk's collar.

"Where are you lodging?"

"We just arrived; we haven't made the necessary accommodations yet. I--"

"Good. You will have an apartment set up in my palace. My servant Jameson will see to it."

Daryk looked at him quizzically.

"Why?"

The anger dropped out of the prince's voice. He spoke in the tone of a frightened, serious child.

"You were right. I need you."

He then turned and headed from the rings. Daryk could hear yells for the Healer, Korrey Dayl preceding him.

He thought, not for the last time, that the prince was an extraordinary young man.

Yet to come...

I had hoped to have even more completed by this time, but the creative process has been slow; the editing even slower. I would like to give you an idea about what is to come that you may understand some of the reasons why I have used certain characters in the way that I have. I don't want to give away the entire story, but here are a few things to look forward to.

Daryk continues his education of Anthony. Anthony discovers that Daryk has the special dreams and powers (still developing) that he does because he has been chosen to take Eanderthall's place as Paladin. Anthony is crowned and becomes king. Through a betrayal by Lleric, Cassie is discovered in Daryk's chamber (after some time). Before the guards can drag Daryk away, Cassie declares before everyone, and most significantly before Lord Michael, that they are husband and wife. Reynald insists on a second marriage to celebrate publicly. Cassie and Daryk are married and Lord Michael aids in an old Talismanic marriage ritual. In the end, Daryk must be banished from the Circle Lands for the murder of the Warynnian guards. Mardynn Farrington disowns his daughter and presses for the Greyman's exile. Daryk and Cassie part, thinking that each wishes to be married to another. Lord Michael follows Daryk, joining with him in his sojourn in the wilderland of the west.

Devin, after parting company with Daryk and Cassie follows the edge of the Harte toward the mythical west. Outside of Tolliver he runs into Alric the mad. Unnerved by the man but starved for company, he accepts the man's companionship. Both are later joined by a dwarf named Hephlo the Luckless. He is on a quest for the warhammer of Sindri Manfriend, Bherandkhal Foebane. He joins them in their journey. They stumble upon the village of Terry Grove where they encounter the brave and curious Eldrics. Three of the Terrymen join them and they continue on to Hadeleft. Deep within the caverns of Hadeleft they discover Dauvendrake the Deathsword and, unbeknownst to them, Bherandkhal. Temyn confronts them and demands the King-blade. Alric takes up the weapon and wards him off. The Dark Servant flees northward.

Ashley has been abducted by the very Inn Master she humiliated at the *Three-Legged Horse*. She escapes with the aid of Jem, the innkeeper's nephew. She manages to kill the evil men who have tortured and taunted her but Jem also dies. She wanders east toward Whitehall in a kind of daze. Anthony discovers her and takes her in. Once she has been washed and dressed like a lady, Anthony recognizes how lovely she is.

Lleric eventually lures Denna to his bed.

There are a few incomplete chapters in the current copy. Most of these deal with Morrigan. He meets up with Harper and Melissa. They have spotted a Bogey unit scouting Idyllvale. Morrigan entrusts them with the care of Whittle and goes after the Bogeys. He is followed by the Wari-tzen. Eventually all three meet. At the same time, Morrigan stumbles upon a beautiful woman bathing herself. He does not know it then, but she is Daelynn of the Gate Elves. She escapes; he remembers her always. His final conflict in this book is with the Stalker.

The rest we may discuss in my evaluation.

Partial Glossary

Aan--Elvish for God
The Adversary--the enemy of Aan
Alandaerra Taht Salmile--A Soft Stroke from My Hand; work by elvish king, Gaemes the Gentle
Aamon--celestial servants of Aan
Artiste the Black--legendary Paladin
Ascension crown--placed on the head of the pretender to the Throne of Whitehall by the king or the Paladin
awareness lamp--mounted in holy places to denote Aan's presence
Ballad--the greatest of the shapers
Barrimore Sael--a Paladin
The Betrayer of Aan--the Adversary
The Black One--Perian Silvertongue
Bloodlord--nobleman-ruler of Tolliver
blue-fire--magical flame that offers light but no heat; produced by Talismen; witchflame
Bogeys--beast/warriors in the service of the Adversary
to brace--to clasp forearms in a show of trust, showing that neither person has a stiletto strapped to his forearm
cast-noble--a nobleman of Fanydd who aids in the governing process by casting a vote on a shard of pottery
channel--an Extrinsic Lord
Circle Lands--independently governed satellite kingdoms of Whitehall
Circlemen--people from the Circle Lands
Cirric--a mastercraftsman of vessels
Confirmation--rite confirming a Magus' arcane mastery
Corsairs--land pirates of the western lands
Council of Regents--council that rules Whitehall in the stead of a legally recognized king
covalph--uncommon stone out of which Caerlydd was fashioned
the Craft--magic
Daemons--twisted Aamon; servants of the Adversary
danesong--elvish song of death
the Dark One--the Adversary
the Dark Servant--the Adversary's warrior-priest
King David--legendary builder of Whitehall; the first High King
David's Bane--Perian Silvertongue
Dauvendrake--the deathsword; Tymelayn
DeCamon--a historian; *History of Myland*
diadem--a rare fey jewel
Dragonrouge--the finest rouge made
dyalf--an evil elf
the edge--crucial moment in Talisman magic where a peak level must be surmounted in order for magic to occur
Elemental--a type of Extrinsic Lord; uses natural elements to produce supernatural magic
Erudite Lord--a type of Extrinsic Lord; most powerful of the Magi, a sorcerer who works magic through spells, periapts, staves, and other devices.
Faether--a mastershaper
Fanydd Red--an excellent rouge

fey--of or relating to the faerie peoples, especially the elvish, dwarvish, eldric and faerie
Fey Lexicon--work by Heniad cataloguing the fey peoples
Flavius--ancient tapestry-weaver
fleow--to magically inscribe
The Four Swords--forged by Llerand Ley for the Dragonriders
Gaemes the Gentle--elvish king and poet
Geoff LeBruse--legendary Healer Master-regent
glowstick--a Talisman torch; teaching aid
graefawn--a small, furry creature that resembles a tiny dragon; the symbol of the house of Erindale
Hall gold--Whitehall currency
Havenmen--people from Foresthaven
Healer--a type of Intrinsic Lord; a Magus who has the power to heal wounds magically
Heniad--journeyman shaper/author
Higheyre--Silvertongue's castle on Ashentop
History of Myland--annals of history by Decamon
The History of the Walker--the last section of *The Lost Tome*; the written and oral tradition relating the travels of the Walker
hollowmen or hollows--anyone who is not a Talisman
Homeland--heaven
Ithylain--Whiteblade; the Prince-blade of the Four
Jarric--a mastercraftsman; especially skilled with wooden items
khazan--dwarvish drink
Kommoran--ancient tapestry-weaver
Lemrith--dragonslayer; sword of King Gaemes
Llerand Lley--mastersmith; forged the blades for the Four Dragonriders
lockspell--magical ward on a door or portal
Lord Thadd--legendary general of Whitehall
The Lost Tome--a collection of tales involving the creation of the world, the fall of the Chosen, the exodus of the elves, and the travels of the Walker
Magus--a sorcerer
Marlough--ancient journeyman shaper
Master-regent--head of the Council of Regents
Mastershaper--highest rank of the shapers
the masterservant--Perian Silvertongue
The Menagerie--collection of tales by Faether about myths, monsters and heroes
Nightfriend--Perian Silvertongue
Nortmen--any of the peoples north of the Shield Mountains
The One--Aan
order-keeper--parliamentarian for the Regent Council
Out of the Boundless--work by the philosopher Symmian
Paal Bahndt--legendary Talisman
the Paladin--high warrior-priest in the service of Aan and the Walker; reported to have mystical powers
pass-door--a magical portal
passways--the linked system of *passdoors*
Pendelayn--Sword of Destiny; the Princess-sword of the Four
Perian Silvertongue--masterservant of the Adversary

Pitchward--harp of Ballad the Mastershaper
pseudodrake--a graefawn
reflection--a magically sent image along *passways*
reeve--law-keeper
Riders--the Four Dragonriders of Aan
Roamers--Shield-roamers
Rongarth--ancient Apprentice Erudite who betrayed his master
a rouge--a potent red wine
sand and scars--a mild Mylandish curse
Savant Lord--a Magus of Whitehall
scrying--a means of magically viewing something; often involving
 prophesying
Seeker--what the elves call Perian Silvertongue
Serpents of the Pit--mythical creatures of hell
Shadowking--what the dwarves call Perian Silvertongue
Shield-roamers--men who patrol the Shield Mountains
shaper--a bard/storyteller
soldiers of the Watch--Watchmen
source--an Intrinsic Lord
Somatic Lord--a type of Intrinsic Lord; uses movements and
 gestures to draw magic from within
Spoiler--what the elves call the Adversary
Stafflord--a Magus of Whitehall; bears a staff of office
staff-tilt--an arcane duel
sundering--public separation of a Magus and the legal opportunity
 to practice magic
Table Gathering--annual gathering at whitehall to discuss and
 adjudicate matters within the realm of the Circle Lands
Tablelord--a mission ambassador visiting Whitehall
Talles--an ancient philosopher
Talismen--race of men born with the power of unassisted magic
Tarasque the Red--legendary dragon
Tarilayn--Queen-sword of the Four
Taylor--the first Paladin
tenalune--a danesong
Teschka--"pet" in Dwarvish
Thaeron II--ancient High King
the Throne--rule of Whitehall; seat of the High King over all the
 Circle Lands
thynestone--a small stone possessing magical qualities; when
 placed near a lock, it opens the lock
a tool--any magical source for a *channel*
the Traveller--the Walker
Tymelayn--King-blade of the Four
Valorbelt--a sign of rank for the Watchers
The Walker--the mythical traveller sent by Aan
Wari-tzen--a murderous man-like beast created by Silvertongue
Watchmen--an order of philosopher-knights in the service of Aan
White noble--nobleman of Whitehall
wingdragon--dragon
witchbane--reported to be poisonous to Talismen
witchflame--*blue-fire*
witchkin--a Talisman (dysphemistic)
The Worldshaper--Aan